POLY PLOTLINES: NARRATIVES OF ETHICAL NON-MONOGAMY IN NOVA SCOTIA

By

Brooke Edwards

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
August 2020

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ABSTRACT

Much of the literature on polyamory is situated in the field of family studies, psychology and gender studies. These studies typically focus on describing the individual experiences of polyamorous relationships without broadly situating the practice in broader social and cultural contexts. This thesis instead, examines polyamory through the sociology of love and intimacy, the anthropology of kinship and the sociology of sexual deviance. It contextualizes why more people are exploring polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamies (CNMs). Drawing on interviews with polyamorous folks designed to illicit their biographical 'sexual' stories, I shed light on how poly folks create and give meaning to their relationship practice, particularly through their early explorations of polyamory. It explores how poly folks' relationship(s) function within the limitations of monogamous institutions and values. Additionally, it explores the tensions that arise within the polyamorous community as the practice becomes more mainstream in North American society.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

BDSM	Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism
CBC	Canadian Broadcasting Corporation
CNMs	Consensual Non-Monogamies
LGBTQA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Asexual, Plus other sexual orientations/identities.
POLY	Polyamorous

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks:

to my supervisor Dr. Fiona Martin for her strong words of encouragement and for her on-going support, patience, and valuable feedback throughout this journey.

to Dr. Martha Radice for sending important reading materials my way and for her insightful comments.

to Dr. Lisel Gambold for agreeing to be my third reader and her helpful suggestions.

to Molly Ryan who took on the brave task of editing my work and listening to me for the past three years as I tried to narrow down my findings.

to Dr. John Newhook for asking me how my thesis was going throughout this past year. These little reminders encouraged me to continue to work on it even when other things in life got busy.

to the poly folks who participated in this study and entrusted me with their stories. The interviews that I conducted in the winter of 2018 were a joy. Thank you for being warm, open and honest about your experiences.

to all who made this project possible. Thank you.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The ways in which people seek romantic relationships are changing in the West (Anapol, 2010; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Illouz, 2012; Swidler, 2001). Books like *The Ethical Slut, More than Two, The State of Affairs,* and *Building Open Relationships,* indicate that consensual non-monogamies (CNMs), polyamory more specifically, are becoming relationship practices which more people are looking to explore. If people are not exploring polyamory themselves, they are likely aware that it exists as news outlets such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Global News, the National Post, The Canadian Press and Vice have published articles about this contemporary relationship practice (Global News, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Migdal, 2020; The Canadian Press, 2018; Windsor, 2018; Zurevinski, 2019). What appears to be growing acceptance is a result of changing norms and values surrounding love and intimacy in some societies. Over the years, cultural, social, political and economic shifts have changed the ways in which people in the West experience and practice romantic relationships (Illouz, 2012).

Polyamory (from the Greek for "many" and the Latin for "loves", with the adjective polyamorous) is the ability to cultivate long-lasting, intimate relationships (sexual or not) with multiple partners simultaneously (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Hardy & Easton, 2017). Polyamory differs from other non-monogamous practices such as polygyny (multiple wives or female partners) and polyandry (multiple husbands or male partners) because all parties in a poly relationship have access to other partners (Barker & Langdridge, 2010). Poly also differs from other forms of CNMs in the West, which tend to be primarily physical/sexual without the goal of forming long-lasting emotional attachments (Mixson & Jankowaik, 2008). One of the key features of polyamorous

relationships is the value placed on cultivating trust, honesty and full disclosure between partners (Barker, 2005; Hardy & Easton, 2017). Although non-monogamy is not new to the West, the practice of polyamory, defined as such, is, and seems to have emerged in the early 1990s (Anapol, 2010, p.13).

Much has been written about love and intimacy in the West through monogamous practices (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012; Swidler, 2001) and researchers have begun to explore contemporary expressions of non-monogamy (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff , 2015; Willis, 2019). Most research on polyamory is situated within the fields of psychology and family studies (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker, 2005; Bettinger, 2005; Constantine & Constantine, 1973; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Contemporary polyamory, in an anthropological and sociological context, remains relatively unexplored. Exceptionally, scholars have published findings detailing how polyamorous relationships come to be with a focus on a monogamous couple opening up their marriage (Balzarini, et al., 2019; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker, 2005).

Scholars have debated whether polyamory is a sexual orientation, a relationship practice or an identity (Anapol, 2010; Kleese, 2014; Sheff, 2015). For the sake of simplicity, I will be referring to polyamory as a relationship practice but recognize that many folks consider it inherently part of their identity. There are different ways to approach how polyamorous folks structure their dynamics (a term that I use throughout the thesis to describe the different relationship networks that participants are a part of and also the practical and emotional dimensions of these relationship(s)). The most common configuration that academic researchers have explored is hierarchical polyamory, which

is something that I discuss at the start of Chapter 2 (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Barker, 2005; Sheff, 2015). Scholars have suggested that other kinds of polyamorous relationship configurations exist, but this has not been extensively explored (Noël, 2006; Sheff, 2015).

My project is situated in contemporary sociology of love and intimacy, the anthropology of kinship and sociology of sexual deviance. It explores the following question: how do poly people navigate and negotiate their way through tensions that they might experience between individual self-fulfillment and commitment in their polyamorous relationships?

I address the gaps in the literature of anthropological kinship by exploring the experiences and functions of polyamorous unions within Canada, specifically Halifax, Nova Scotia. In this vein, I ask the following sub research questions: what enables polyamorous unions to function across multiple parties? How do their practices deviate from or intersect with heteronormative monogamous values? As polyamory has further developed as a subculture and made its way into the mainstream[1], I further explore how people who are polyamorous create norms and values to give meaning to their relationship(s). What kind of poly politics and tension emerge as this practice comes closer to legitimization? These questions will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

1.1 THESIS OVERVIEW

Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature that informs my research questions and further contextualizes the need for more research on the topic of polyamory. It first pays homage to early research conducted on polyamory that lays the foundation for

[1] By mainstream I mean when ideas, activities and attitudes are widely seen as conventional or normal/ These ideas, activities and attitudes are often reinforced through laws and policies.

scholarly understanding of what polyamory in relation to stigma and issues of polynormativity. Second, it explores the literature on contemporary sociology of love and intimacy in the West in order to demonstrate how relationship practices have changed through the growing cultural value of individualism coupled contemporary social and economic changes, creating a culture of choice. The next section covers marriage as a changing institution from the lens of the anthropology of kinship. This explores changing structures and ideals of the family. Finally, Chapter 2 will further situate my study in the sociology of sexual deviance to argue that due to more conversation about sexual values and identities, polyamory may be starting to move towards mainstream culture.

Chapter 3 explores my methodological approach, namely, the sociological method of storytelling, particularly biographical 'sexual' stories that allow participants to describe their journeys towards living a polyamorous life. This approach yields insights into how participants rationalize their practice and create norms and values to guide them in this practice that is still predominantly on the fringes of society. It briefly introduces some of the participant demographics, the ways the data that informed my findings was analyzed and ethical considerations for this study.

The next chapters delve into my findings. Chapter 4 identifies how participants in this study approached polyamory for the first time. It explores their narratives about how they underwent on-going self-reflection to develop an approach a new contemporary practice. It recounts how participants often took a trial-by-fire approach to creating their relationship(s), and how broad boundaries and relationship flexibility allow for relationship structures to change.

Chapter 5 explores participants' rationalizations for how they create their dynamics and how those dynamics are often limited by monogamous institutions and learned monogamous values. Specifically, it explores polyamory in relation to hierarchy by first describing many participants' ideals of achieving egalitarian dynamics. Second, it looks at how these dynamics are impacted by monogamous institutions. Third, it explores how poly folks who were newer to the practice tend to create their relationship(s) hierarchically in order to accommodate the least comfortable partner. Finally, this section examines how polyamorous dynamics function when children are involved.

Chapter 6 speaks to how stigma shapes the ways in which polyamorous folks create their dynamics and how these relationship networks function in various public settings. Furthermore, it talks about the ways in which participants wanted to dispel myths surrounding polyamory by describing how they wanted to see polyamory portrayed in the media. Their thinking was that this would help to legitimize the practice. However, participants often had conflicting views of how polyamory should be represented, which causes a "poly politics" to emerge within the community.

Chapter 7 revisits the main arguments made in the thesis, while resituating the findings back into the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, it identifies areas of future research and indicates limitations of this study.

I will now explore the literature in more depth to further situate my study and provide more context for my research questions.

CHAPTER 2: EXPANDING FIELDS OF RESEARCH ON POLYAMORY

Several studies have looked into polyamory, in particular the shared features of polyamorous relationships and stigma management for those who are polyamorous, and speculating why this practice has gained popularity in recent years (Anapol, 2010; Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Ritchie , 2010; Sheff, 2015).The literature on polyamory and consensual non-monogamies (CNMs) remains focused in the fields of family studies, gender studies and psychology, leaving the practice relatively unexplored by anthropologists and sociologists. This literature review briefly summarizes the family studies, gender studies and psychology literature on polyamory, identifying its main contribution from a social science perspective: its attention to racial and socio-economic privilege, stigma management and public perceptions. I suggest that research on polyamory might also benefit from an engagement with key bodies of sociological and anthropological literature, to better situate it within its social and cultural contexts. The first two—the sociology of love and intimacy and the anthropology of kinship—help to situate polyamory as one of many changing practices of love, intimacy, and the family in contemporary western societies. The last body of literature—the sociology of sexual deviance—helps to demonstrate how stigma shapes the ways in which people engage in, and attempt to legitimize, polyamory. This review helps to lay the foundation for my analysis of the key study findings.

2.1 POLYAMORY AND ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION

Over the last couple of decades, academics have had a growing interest in the emergence of consensual non-monogamies (CNMs) (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker, 2005; Bettinger, 2005; Kleese , 2014; Noël, 2006; Schippers, 2016; Sheff, 2015). Within this literature on CNMs, polyamory has become a particular focus, mirroring the

growing public interest in the practice (Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014; Migdal, 2020; Saxey , 2010; Schippers, 2020; Rambukkana, 2010; Ritchie , 2010). The literature on polyamory has emerged largely from the fields of psychology, gender studies and family studies and is mostly based on research conducted in the United States and United Kingdom. Much of the research is qualitative, and so provides the groundwork for understanding polyamory from the perspective of the people who practice it.

The majority of literature on polyamory focuses on defining its broad characteristics and the general values of those who practice it (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Kleese, 2006; Sheff, 2011). This research has yielded valuable insights, such as recognizing that people in polyamorous relationships place a high value on honesty, respect, and communication, and that these are often core principles shaping the practice (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Sheff, 2011; Willis, 2019; Wolkomir, 2015). Some of these studies touch on the question why more people are exploring CNMs in the early 21st century (Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Kleese, 2006; Sheff, 2011), citing general trends, like rising divorce rates and infidelity, but most focus on the individual-level characteristics. Scholars discuss partners opening up their marriages because one partner is gay (Wolkomir, 2015), for example, or so that one partner can be sexually fulfilled by another who has similar interests (Barker, 2005; Mixson & Jankowaik, 2008; Wolkomir, 2015).

These descriptions are largely of a particular type of polyamorous relationship, the hierarchical polyamorous relationship (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Barker, 2005; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). This refers to when a monogamous couple (the “primaries”) opens up

their relationship to other partners ("secondaries") who do not hold equivalent power in the relationship, and it draws largely on the perspectives of primary partners (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Balzarini, et al., 2019). This focus has created some gaps in the literature. While studies often hint that there are other, non-hierarchical polyamorous relationship configurations, these have been left relatively unexplored (Noël, 2006). Some studies have examined perspectives of secondary partners through online forums and surveys (Balzarini, et al., 2019; Jordan, Gorgan, Muruthi, & Bermudez, 2017; Willis, 2019), but there is little qualitative research that includes the perspectives of "secondaries" (Schippers, 2016; Sheff, 2015). The unintentional result of these gaps is that much academic research creates an image of polyamory consistent with monogamy, where the primary couple passes for monogamous and often prioritize each other, and which some scholars deem problematic (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Jordan, Gorgan, Muruthi, & Bermudez, 2017; Noël, 2006; Rambukkana, 2010; Ritchie , 2010; Schippers, 2016; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Several studies attempt to critically examine these gaps in the literature. Some, such as Mimi Schippers (2016), directly address what she calls "polynormativity," describing it as "beliefs, practices, and values that reflect and sustain regimes of sexual and relationship normalcy and/or social privilege along the lines of class, race gender, religion, citizenship and so on" (p.18). She argues that the popular image of polyamory in fact mirrors monogamous values and leaves them unchallenged (Schippers, 2016, p.19). Racial and socio-economic status is also a popular topic of discussion in the literature on polyamory (Barker, 2005; Jordan, Gorgan, Muruthi, & Bermudez, 2017; Noël, 2006; Pitagora, 2016; Schippers, 2016; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Sheff, 2015). Many highlight

the privilege that the participants in their studies (and those who are represented as polyamorous in the media) hold (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff & Hammers, 2011), noting that they are often white, upper-middle class, highly educated and in a heterosexual hierarchical relationship (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Noël, 2006; Rambukkana, 2010; Saxey , 2010; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

Some suggest that a relatively homogenous and privileged group of people are more likely to come forward to share their stories because polyamory is still relatively uncommon and not entirely uncontroversial. But this suggestion has had serious implications. As some suggest, privilege may be why there has not been as much of a push to have polyamorous unions legalized (Kleese, 2014; Sheff, 2011). Kleese (2014) argues that there has been a lack of struggle for the implementation of laws towards multiple partner unions likely because many polyamorous people can pass as monogamous; their monogamous privilege allows them to appear to be adhering to heteronormative values (Kleese, 2014). These insights about polyamory and privilege relate to another significant topic of discussion within the research on polyamory: stigma and how those who practice polyamory manage it, especially if they are also parents.

2.2 POLYAMORY, PARENTING AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT

In addition to discussing privilege, scholars have also recognized that polyamory is a stigmatized practice and have examined this through the added complication of children (Anapol, 2010; Kleese C,2019; Sheff, 2011). Polyamorous parenting is taboo; it is therefore difficult to get ethics approval to study polyamorous families and their children. Moreover, it is difficult to get ethics approval to study children even in non-taboo situations. (Kleese,2019). Sheff, however, was able to gain access to American children and parents in her study (2015). She was interested in how children interpret

their parents' alternative relationship practices, and found that most are accepting of it, but some are not, particularly those whose parents may not have always been polyamorous (Sheff, 2015). This work was ground-breaking, but further research surrounding how parenting and polyamorous unions function in society more generally remains scarce (Kleese, 2019).

In addition to examining polyamory and parenting, scholars have also been interested in how poly folks manage stigma. Some scholars have talked about how stigma influences participants' decisions to 'come out' to friends and families or not (Sheff, 2015). For example, some discuss how polyamorous folks will choose to 'pass' as monogamous to protect the family unit, while others will choose not to, and they will instead politicize public environments in order to maintain integrity and pride, which some scholars describe as 'polluting' (Kleese, 2019; Sheff, 2015). Often those who 'pass' hold less socio-economic and racial privileges than those who 'pollute' (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). While this yields important insights about polyamory and stigma management, there has not been a lot of research about how decisions to come out to friends, family and/or the general public impact the everyday lives of individuals and their partner(s). There may be more opportunities to explore this as polyamory is a more widely discussed topic in society, the impact of which increasingly interests scholars (Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014; Schippers, 2020; Seguin, 2019).

2.3 POLYAMORY IN THE MEDIA: A PATH TO LEGITIMACY

Researchers have been interested in polyamory and CNMs and their representation in the media and the public sphere (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, & Johnson, 2016; Rambukkana, 2010; Ritchie , 2010; Saxey , 2010). Studies conducted a decade ago discuss how polyamory and other CNMs are villainized in the media,

contributing to stigma surrounding the relationship practice (Ritchie, 2010; Saxey, 2010). Others discuss how the emerging narratives of polyamory in the media are often told from the perspectives of those who hold societal privileges (Rambukkana, 2010). These scholars provide valuable insights about how mono-normativity shapes values of love and intimacy, creating little space for 'deviant' practices. In recent years, however, public perception of polyamory has started to change (Seguin, 2019).

Polyamory in Canada has become a more common topic of news articles (MacDonald, 2018; Migdal, 2020; Windsor, 2018; Zurevinski, 2019). As polyamory has gained more public attention, researchers have asked how lay people perceive polyamorous relationships (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, & Johnson, 2016; Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014; Schippers, 2020; Seguin, 2019). These studies indicate that polyamory is the most accepted form of consensual non-monogamies (Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014). Some suggest that polyamory and consensual non-monogamies have been in plain sight in popular culture for longer than we may have realized (Schippers, 2020). There are still many people who would not accept polyamory as a relationship practice, and often misperceive it as polygamy, seeing polygamy as oppressive to women or as another CNM that emphasizes sex rather than love. However, scholars have demonstrated that attitudes are starting to change, which could lead to legal recognition of multiple partner unions in the future (Hutzler, Giuliano, Herselman, & Johnson, 2016; Seguin, 2019).

In sum, the early literature on polyamory has been in situated in psychology, gender studies and family studies. These studies help to define polyamory, and identify some of its core values, offering important findings into this contemporary practice and

why it has started to become more widely accepted. These scholars have also done important work in noting the overrepresentation of poly people in hierarchical relationships, who tend to hold more racial and socioeconomic privilege in society. Additionally, scholars have examined polyamory in the context of its legality. These studies showed how children perceive their parents' practice along with the various ways that participants handle stigma. Scholars have also been interested in how polyamory is interpreted by the general public and represented in the mainstream media, which has demonstrated changing attitudes towards non-monogamies.

The literature has left other possible themes largely unexamined, however. With some exceptions (Constantine & Constantine, 1973; Schippers, 2016; Sheff E, 2015), few scholars examine polyamorous people's day-to-day experiences and relationship structures. Very few explore how these experiences and practices are shaped by public perceptions. And very few studies discuss the broader social and cultural reasons of why more people are exploring CNMs at this historical moment, which is a critically important question (eg. Anapol, 2010; Balzarni, et al., 2017; Kleese, 2006; Sheff, 2011). My study aims to address some of these gaps. In order to do this, I draw on other relevant literatures, namely the sociology of contemporary love and intimacy, the anthropology of kinship, and the sociology of sexual deviance in order to situate polyamory within broader social and cultural contexts in the West at this historical moment.

2.4 HOW THE CULTURE OF CHOICE IS RESHAPING INTIMACY

The sociological literature on love and intimacy in the West suggests that a form of individualism is emerging out of contemporary economic and social conditions which have radically altered ideals and expectations around relationship practices (Bauman, 2003; Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2012). These contemporary economic and social conditions

include more women obtaining education, entering into the workforce, and gaining more autonomy over their bodies through contraceptives; the creation of the welfare state; and social habits that have emerged out of capitalism, such as consumerism (Bauman, 2003; Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2012). These changes contributed to a shifting ideal from creating bonds in order to expand kinship ties to an ideal of individualism. These shifts started in the mid to late 20th century (Illouz, 2012). Individualism, in this context, is the individual's autonomy, or imagined autonomy, to choose love (or not) (Illouz, 2012, p.19). Eva Illouz explains that "marital choices" based on love tend to be individualistic— "that is, to make individuals—not their clan or family—the bearers of decision to marry, thereby legitimizing emotional autonomy" (Illouz, 2012, p. 40).Whereas once people (in the West) married for familial reasons, with the goal of expanding kinship ties, they now do so with the goal of attaining emotional intimacy and psychological compatibility with another person (Illouz, 2012, p. 42). According to Illouz (2012), this emphasis on choice in the realm of romantic relationships is a product of contemporary economic conditions that enable people to gain more economic independence from kinship ties resulting in a form of individualism. We increasingly see our selves and our individual self-fulfillment, she argues, as being realized through the choices that we make, including in the realm of romantic love (Illouz, 2012). As she explains:

> Choice is one of the most powerful cultural and institutional vectors shaping modern selfhood; it is both a right and a form of competence. If choice is intrinsic to modern individuality how and why people choose—

> or not—to enter into a relationship is crucial to understanding love as an experience of modernity (Illouz, 2012, p. 19).

Others have argued that the search for self-fulfillment means that people have an increasing fear of commitment (Bauman, 2003; Finn, 2010; Illouz, 2012). Zygmunt Bauman (2003), for example, discusses ways in which modernity, capitalism and choice have shifted cultural practices of love and intimacy, by discussing various tensions that arise between finding "the one" while being careful not to close doors on a more suitable or "better" option. Furthermore, he highlights the tensions between people's desire to find a fulfilling relationship while also not wanting to lose their autonomy. He explores the ways in which contemporary economic and social changes have lead people into turning love into a commodity, explaining that:

> Human attention tends nowadays to be focused on the satisfactions that relationships are hoped to bring precisely because somehow they have not been found truly satisfactory; and if they do satisfy, the price of the satisfaction they bring has often been found to be excessive [too much commitment and loss of autonomy] and unacceptable (Bauman, 2003, p. ix).

As a result, Bauman argues that we have created a culture of "liquid love" in the wake of "liquid modernity", meaning that people create bonds with one another and desire to keep those bonds close, but at the same time, loose like a liquid, for fear of missing out on something, or someone, better and fear of losing their autonomy (Bauman, 2003). People also have more opportunity to explore relationships with potential partners through the development of digital communication technologies, such as online dating, which make

people who are like-minded more easily accessible to one another (Bauman, 2003). Digital communication technologies have shifted the ways in which people seek relationships, along with their ability to commit, however, romantic love remains a strong ideology in the West.

Romantic love remains a powerful ideal in Western societies (Bauman, 2003; Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2012; Swidler, 2001); it is routinely celebrated and expressed across multiple popular media platforms, such as movies, TV shows, literature, and love songs (Barker, 2005). Ann Swidler (2001) defines romantic love as a clear "all-or-nothing choice" that permanently resolves the individual's destiny and is "made in defiance of social forces" with a unique other as its object (Swidler, 2001, pp. 113-114). She explores how these ideas influence people's practices and perceptions of their romantic relationships, arguing that while people are often critical of the romantic love ideology, they also, at the same time, evoke it when explaining their own relationships. This suggests that although people's experiences within their relationships often do not match the cultural ideal of romantic love, this cultural expectation remains powerful and thus produces contradictions and tensions in the realm of intimacy.

Love and intimacy and the culture of choice is often discussed among researchers in the West (Illouz, 2012; Swidler, 2001). Researchers, however, do not typically include consensual non-monogamies when discussing these cultural changes, besides mentioning it in passing (Illouz, 2012; Swidler, 2001). Even researchers who do talk about CNMs typically discuss the ways in which the relationship(s) mirror monogamy in some ways without situating the research in changing norms around love and intimacy more broadly (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Willis, 2019; Wolkomir, 2015).

My research seeks to fill this gap, by situating polyamory within the broader societal changes as a result of the contemporary economic and social conditions feeding the ideal of individualism. In addition to this, I situate my study in the anthropology in kinship in order to examine the 'family' and marriage as a changing institution.

2.5 THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF KINSHIP: MARRIAGE AS A CHANGING INSTITUTION

Coupled with the growing tensions between the ideology and practices of love, perceptions of marriage have also been shifting (Coontz, 2005; Nock, 1999). The practice of monogamy is, cross-culturally speaking, newer than practices of non-monogamy, but it became the dominant practice in the West[2] through the rise of Christianity (Coontz, 2005; Stern & Condon, 2011). Traditionally, in the West, monogamous marital unions were formally entered into to establish or strengthen familial ties (Goody, 1971). The expansion of familial ties was especially important for the expansion of land ownership and farm labour (Goody, 1971). In the West, the ideal conception of a marital union was, and to some degree still is, monogamous, consisting of a male and female dyad with the male as active, and the female as passive (Barker, 2005; Jackson & Scott, 2014). In other words, the man was the symbolic head of the household who traditionally dealt with its economic transactions outside of the home, in the public sphere, while the woman was seen as the head of domestic labour the inside the home. This created mutual dependency within the dyad (Coontz, 2005).

Monogamous marriage is still the dominant practice within the West, but marriage as an institution is changing for many reasons. The largest is arguably the Sexual Revolution, which took place in the 1960s, as scholars like Stephanie Coontz suggest

[2] By the West I mean North America and Europe

(Coontz, 2005; Finn, 2010; Goode, 1971). Coontz's (2005) study explores how the industrial revolution, the sexual revolution and women's rights movements have changed why people decide to marry. Coontz and others cite the emergence of contraceptives such as the Pill as major events that shifted the ways in which marriage was practiced (Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2012; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Women gaining more control over their fertility by using the Pill as contraception is largely responsible for the Sexual Revolution, but also resulted in women's increased independence and autonomy over their bodies (Coontz, 2005; Jackson & Scott, 2014). As a result of this independence, more women sought higher education and entered into the work force, which, in turn, allowed them more financial security and independence (Coontz, 2005). Women's increased control over their fertility and their pursuit of higher education meant that people began to marry at older ages, or in some cases, chose not to marry at all (Coontz, 2005; Goode, 1971). Economic independence made divorce more of an option than it was before the 1950s, when fewer women worked outside the home (Coontz, 2005; Jackson & Scott, 2014). Through these changes, people often sought marriage for other reasons, such as romantic love.

Marriage was previously focused on biological kinship, and still is in many parts of the world (Leach, 1971). In the West, where multiple incomes in the same home is a benefit, other forms of "the family" have started to emerge since the 1970s, however (Bettinger, 2005; Simon & Gagnon, 1967). People are creating families that are less focused on biological kinship and are instead, more flexible and "intentional" (Bettinger, 2005; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Sheff, 2015). The idea of the intentional family emerged in articles that discussed gay men who were generally marginalized from their

friends and families when they came out (Bettinger, 2005; Simon & Gagnon, 1967). They would often create intentional families with their friends or other gay men who accepted their sexual orientations (Bettinger, 2005; Sheff,2011; Simon & Gagnon, 1967). The literature on the intentional family has expanded from the gay communities to the broader LGBTQ2IA community, to polyamorous communities and to friendships (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Sheff, 2011). For example, Roseneil and Budgeon explore changing norms of family structure through the experience of two women who were sharing a house and raising their children together as friends (2004). This is an example of how friends can help one another through having multiple incomes. This demonstrates that although marriage as an institution has been left relatively unchanged, social values of what is considered to be 'family' have transcended biological ties to better suit the needs and circumstances of those involved in these families.

In the West, the anthropological literature exploring the structures of marriage primarily discusses marriage in terms of monogamy, leaving non-monogamous partnerships relatively unexplored. However, there has been literature that discusses the emergence of intentional families, but there should be more in-depth research conducted on how these families function in various relationship configurations. This cultural shift in redefining the family has changed much more quickly than the institution of marriage itself, something that scholars say may cause monogamous marriage to perish all together (Nock, 1999). In tandem with these cultural changes, sexual norms and values are being redefined by broader society which continues to alter how we define the manifestation of the 'family' and intimate relationships.

2.6 THE SOCIOLOGY OF SEXUAL 'DEVIANCE': CREATING A SUBCULTURE FOR STIGMATIZED PRACTICES

Polyamory is a stigmatized practice, which is why I also situate my study in the sociology of sexual 'deviance'. Howard Becker (1963) defines deviance, also known as labelling theory, as "not a quality that lies in the behaviour itself but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it" (Becker, 1963, p. 14). Deviance, in other words, is an action or behaviour sanctioned by others; this sanctioning, in turn, reveals the norms and values in a given society or group (Becker, 1963). Becker explains that "where people who engage in deviant activities have opportunity to interact with one another, they are likely to develop a culture built around the problems rising out of the differences" (Becker, 1963, p. 84). This leads to the creation of subcultures with new sets of norms and values. In other words, people often create subcultural norms of their own when they are labelled deviant and thus rejected by mainstream society.

Polyamory has not been extensively explored within the literature on sexual deviance (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Simon & Gagnon, 1967), but drawing on the definition above, it seems clear that polyamory is, or at least was, a subculture. Scholars debate as to whether polyamory is a sexual orientation, an identity, or a practice, but they agree that it deviates from the monogamous norm (Kleese, 2014; Sheff, 2011). According to previous studies, people who practice polyamory also often create alternative norms and values that govern their relationship(s), namely openness, honesty, and communication (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Hardy & Easton, 2017; Sheff, 2015). That polyamory is a subculture is also suggested by the fact that some polyamorous folks seem to adopt polyamory as an identity. For example, some

participants in Sheff's study (2015) believed that it was inherently part of who they were (Sheff, 2015). Additionally, some are protective of who uses the label to define themselves (Kean, 2018; Kleese, 2006). In short, it seems that polyamory is a common enough practice that a "deviant" subculture has formed around it, along with associated identities and subcultural norms and values.

At the same time, polyamory is beginning to gain more public acceptance (Seguin, 2019) and appears to be moving to the mainstream. This is evident through the increase in publications of self-help and how-to books on polyamory such as *The Ethical Slut (*which sold over 200,000 copies in its first edition in 1997) (Hardy & Easton , 2017) and other books such as *Building Open Relationships* (2018) and the *Polyamory Breakup Book* (2019), to name only a few (Kassel, 2020). Polyamory has started to garner increasing interest from the public.

At the same time, news outlets are also offering more representations that detail experiences of those who are polyamorous (Global News, 2018; MacDonald, 2018; Migdal, 2020). This kind of increased publicity of polyamory, leading potentially towards normalization, has been compared with the Gay Rights movements (Sheff, 2011). The telling of of sexual stories, as occurred in the wake of the Gay Rights movement, is one of the ways in which previously marginalized practices become normalized and increasingly socially accepted (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

The emergence of polyamory and its normalization can both be attributed to what Jeffery Weeks (1995) calls the "age of uncertainty." As he argues, Western sexuality was at a pivotal point during the Sexual Revolution and Gay Rights Movement. He explained that an age of uncertainty emerged and that "nowhere is this uncertainty more

acute than in the domain of sexuality, which has been the subject in the recent past of apparently endless panics, controversies, anguished moralizing and the rebirth of the value issue" (Weeks, 1995, p. 4). This age of uncertainty about sexual politics leaves heteronormative values more vulnerable to change and potentially makes the counter-hegemonic ideals that were emerging more difficult to resist. On the one hand, the ongoing discussion and negotiation of sexual values can bring a subculture such as polyamory towards the mainstream, but at the same time this creates uncertainty surrounding monogamous values, which can bring about a backlash. This has the potential to create hierarchies of counter-hegemonic ideals and practices.

Societal values are always organized within hierarchies that are dominated by race, class and economic status, in mainstream and subcultures alike (Becker, 1963; Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1995). Hierarchies can emerge within all subcultures, but in the context of polyamory it is generally those who are white, upper middle-class and highly educated who are the most powerful. These are the people who are typically asked to tell their stories publicly (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). This can create inequalities within subcultures and leave people who do not fit those privileged categories to be further marginalized. In the context of polyamory, this was discussed as "polynormativity" (Schippers, 2016) where there tends to be a single narrative of a previously monogamous couple opening up their marriage for the first time (Sheff, 2015). At this historical juncture, sexual values continue to be renegotiated across various parties, although class, race and heterosexual privilege can dictate this rhetoric (Rambukkana, 2010; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Polyamory, at least a certain narrative of polyamory, could be moving towards the mainstream because the idea of romantic love is firmly entrenched in

monogamous values, thus more widely accepted than other forms of CNMs that place an emphasis on sexual relationships without romantic love (Matsick, Conley, Ziegler, Moors, & Rubin, 2014; Seguin, 2019).

Polyamory deviates from monogamy enough that those who practice it felt it necessary to create and protect a subculture of their own, which is why I situate my study in the sociology of sexual deviance. At the same time, the practice seems to be undergoing a process of normalization, although this process appears to be uneven. Scholars have briefly touched on polyamorous norms and values such as respect, honesty and communication and briefly mention them in relation to other CNMs, However, there is no discussion about how possible intersections between other non-monogamies help and/or hinder the creation of the norms and values of the practice. In other words, there is not a lot of research that seeks to understand how those who are polyamorous give meaning to their practice, and how they integrate themselves (or not) into the subculture Exploring polyamory through the lens of the sociology of sexual deviance helps to shed light on how this subculture is being formed and negotiated by those who are part of it. This will in turn demonstrate how polyamorous folks create meaning for their practice within a predominantly monogamous society and how they negotiate their values as polyamory creeps closer to mainstream.

2.7 POLYAMORY IN THE WAKE OF CHANGING NORMS AND VALUES

The existing literature about polyamory has helpfully described some of its characteristics and values, demonstrated the stigmatization of the practice, identified the impact of polynormativity, and explored public perceptions of the practice. However, this literature has emerged from only a few fields of study. Situating polyamory in broader sociological and anthropological literatures is important to exploring how polyamorous

folks navigate their relationship(s) in current cultural and social contexts. Likewise, the sociology of love and intimacy has left CNMs, and polyamory in particular, relatively untouched in its analysis of impact of individualism on interpersonal relationships. The anthropology of kinship has explored many different iterations of the family, from biological to intentional, but mostly explores in the West changing structures of the family in relation to monogamy, leaving polyamory and kinship unexamined. The sociology of sexual deviance is an important field of which to consider when exploring the construction of a subculture such as polyamory, especially has this subculture becomes more mainstream. There is some literature that has discussed general norms and values of those who practice polyamory, and how privilege often plays a role in constructing these norms and values, but how these continue to be shaped and negotiated as the practice becomes more mainstream has been left unexplored. This is because polyamory was so new and was on the fringes of society when research was being conducted in this area. However, as it becomes a more widely recognized practice, this is the perfect time to expand research about polyamory in relation to how new norms, values and meanings are being shaped by the group and by whom. The following chapter will discuss my research design and methodology.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As discussed in the previous chapter, my research aims to expand the anthropological and sociological literature on polyamory, in order to comment on changing practices of love and intimacy in the twenty-first century. Specifically, this study asks: How do polyamorous folks navigate and negotiate their way through tensions that they might experience between individual self-fulfillment and commitment in their relationship(s)? Additionally, this study seeks to add to the literature on polyamory, which focuses on describing the practice through general characteristics, by exploring the various ways in which participants created and gave meaning to their polyamorous practices. To this, I asked the following sub research questions: What enables polyamorous unions to function across multiple parties and how do their practices deviate or intersect with heteronormative monogamous values? I explored these questions through semi-structured interviews with participants who identified as polyamorous. These interviews were designed to elicit the participants' biographical 'sexual' stories that detail their experience of being polyamorous in a predominantly monogamous society.

3.1 TELLING A 'SEXUAL' STORY: BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

My research data was gathered by means of sixteen semi-structured interviews with people who self-identified as polyamorous, about their biographical relationships and identity. Although not the most popular research method used in studies that have been conducted on polyamory, I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews have been used successfully in some previous studies of polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamies (Barker, 2005; Mixson & Jankowaik, 2008; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). I departed from previous studies by designing an

interview guide to elicit people's accounts of relationship(s) and identity, building on Kenneth Plummer's work, *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), which highlights the potential for narrative and biographical storytelling as a method in the social sciences. This was a departure from other quantitative research and structured interviews because I ensured that participants were able to attribute their own definitions to their practice.

Plummer notes an increase in the sharing of "sexual stories" publicly, through media platforms such as TV or in newspapers, particularly by sexual minorities such as those in the LGBTQA+ community. He explains that for such narratives to flourish, "there must be a community to hear; that for communities to hear, there must be stories which weave together their history, their identity and their politics. The one—community—feeds upon and into the other—story" (Plummer, 1995, p. 87). According to Plummer, sexual stories can be a powerful political tool in changing the ways in which society sees marginalized groups (Plummer, 1995). We have seen this in the growing acceptance and legalization of same-sex marriage, which resulted in part from more people sharing their 'coming out' stories (Plummer, 1995). I drew on Plummer's idea of a sexual story to inform my methods because it appears as though a similar process of "sexual story-telling" is occurring with regard to polyamory, through public media platforms such as mainstream newspapers, TV-shows, how-to books and through social media apps such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook.

My aim, therefore, was to elicit people's relationship narratives, an approach not often adopted in previous studies on polyamory. Using semi-structured interviews allowed participants to contextualize their relationship experiences and the boundaries that they drew within them. Furthermore, although nonmonogamy is not new, the term

polyamory is. The language and definitions within this subculture remain under constant debate and negotiation (Hardy & Easton, 2017; Kleese, 2006). Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to define terms, practices and values in ways that may not have already been articulated within the literature. Interview questions were also deliberately open-ended to make it more likely that people would elaborate more on their experiences which could result in a departure from the normative version of polyamory discussed in the literature review. This was a gap that has been identified by other academics (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Noël, 2006; Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

3.2 RECRUITMENT

After receiving approval to undertake this study from the Dalhousie University REB, I recruited sixteen participants for the study in three different ways. The first was through a post to the Halifax Polyamory Facebook Group, a closed group that acts as a "poly friendly" virtual space and support group for people who are polyamorous in Halifax and surrounding areas in Nova Scotia. Halifax Polyamory has more than six hundred members and continues to grow.

This group has four moderators. It has a strict rule against "cruising" (looking for dates in the group) and aims to be a space for people to share their experiences, ask for advice and to introduce themselves if they are new to polyamory and if they are seeking mentorship and community. People are also able to post poly-related material, but the group has a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and discrimination. Group members who break the rules are supposedly removed from the group immediately. With the permission of the moderators, I was allowed to post the recruitment poster once in the group as the research aimed to hear varied stories of polyamory, something of which the moderators found of value as they were very critical of polynormativity and actively tried

to combat that within the group through promoting marginalized voices. I explained in this post that participants needed to be the age of eighteen or above and they needed to self-identify as polyamorous. I did not define what I meant as polyamorous, so as to not exclude anyone who did not share the same definition. Through this post, I recruited seven participants.

This Facebook group also facilitated family-friendly events such as bi-weekly coffees on Friday evenings and bi-weekly brunches on Sunday for group members to meet one another and socialize in a space free of judgment. The places where these events happened were carefully vetted by the organizers to eliminate any discrimination that the group may experience should they be outed. Similar to the Facebook group, these events were not meant for dating, but to create a community of like-minded individuals. Individuals caught harassing anyone in attendance or making someone uncomfortable would be asked to leave the event immediately. I was invited by the Facebook group moderators to attend these events, and I did so, for a total of three coffees and one brunch. My intention was not recruitment, but instead to become known to potential participants, which I explained, so as not to mislead anyone. However, I received many questions about my research at these events, which led to interest from individuals who wanted to participate in the study, and so this ended up being my second method of recruitment. Five individuals who I met at the events volunteered to be interviewed.

Although I was part of the Halifax Polyamory Facebook Group and I attended events, I did not use these platforms for data collection. This was because those spaces were designated as “safe spaces” and I did not feel that it was ethical to use information coming from potentially vulnerable people seeking support. Furthermore, the moderators

have had issues in the past with researchers asking questions at the events; they asked that I not gather data at them. For these reasons, I was sure to reiterate to attendees and moderators that I would not use posts from the Facebook Group nor observations from the events in my research.

My third recruitment method was snowball sampling. I recruited an additional four participants using this method. Participants often referred their partner(s) and other polyamorous friends to be interviewed for the study. The polyamorous community is small, which posed some ethical challenges in protecting confidentiality. In order to protect the identities of any referred participants, I asked that they be referred using pseudonyms, and by withholding or altering other identifying details, such as their line of work. In some cases, however, participants would disclose that I had already interviewed their partner(s) (and they would refer to them by their real name). In my findings chapters, I note that some participants are in a domestic relationship with one another, but I only refer to those who disclosed that they knew their partner(s) had been interviewed. I also only disclose information that was common knowledge within the partnership. I do not identify those involved in expanded polyamorous networks, nor any opinions that participant(s) may have had regarding their partner(s) decisions or conduct in other relationship(s).

Once I recruited the participants through the Facebook group, poly friendly events and snowball sampling, I asked them to read and sign a consent form before conducting a semi structured interview. This form reiterated their right to stop the interview at any time, assured them that I would be using pseudonyms, and gave them permission to

withdraw their interview before March 2018. These signed forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. See Appendix 1 for a copy of the consent form.

3.3 INTERVIEWS

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted in a public place of the participants' choice. There is stigma attached to polyamorous practices, and polyamorous people who are not "out" typically live in fear of becoming marginalized by broader society. Additionally, the polyamorous community in Halifax is small, meaning that many folks who are active in that community know each other. Thus, it was important that the participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed in a more private space, where both they and myself felt comfortable, but all of them chose a public place such as a café.

The interview guide comprised three sections (Appendix). The first section solicited a chronological and biographical account of how the participants came to practice nonmonogamy, how they defined polyamory and explored the ways in which they organized their relationship(s) and how those relationship(s) functioned in practice. This was chronological, in order to develop an understanding about how participants understood the practice broadly, and how their dynamics emerge and function in actual practice. This section also contained questions for participants with children, about how they broach the subject of polyamory (or not) with them.

Media representation, or lack of, is something that I identified as an area of interest with this new and developing practice, which is why the second section of the interview asked participants about their thoughts on how polyamory was being represented and how they would like to see it represented in the media. The final section sought general demographic information about participants' education levels, where they

grew up, and their current relationships. These questions were asked bearing in mind that certain demographic groups tend to participate in these kinds of studies (discussed further below). Often, the demographic questions were answered throughout the first couple of sections of the interview.

The interviews were designed in such a way that I did not have to ask many of the questions; the interview typically flowed in the way that the interview guide predicted that it might. When necessary, I would steer the conversation back to the question, but having the conversation go off topic was very rare. The polyamorous community is small, and I am not part of it, which was advantageous when talking with participants. I was knowledgeable about the topic, which meant participants did not need to contextualize or justify their decision to be polyamorous, but I also did not know the individuals who they were referring to because I was an outsider, and so I offered some assurance of confidentiality. I think it also helped establish trust between myself and participants that I deliberately avoided asking questions about sex or jealousy. These are persistently sensationalised topics in mainstream media stories about polyamory, and issues that polyamorous people are continuously asked to address. The open nature of the semi-structured interview allowed for participants to touch on these subjects if they felt was necessary, and many did, but I did not solicit these discussions. One limitation to using this method is that I was unable to see if what participants told me about how they practiced polyamory mirrored what their relationship(s) were like in practice.

3.4 PARTICIPANTS

Lack of representation from minority groups has been identified as a gap in studies about polyamory (Balzarni, et al., 2017; Ferrer, 2018; Kleese, 2006; Noël, 2006; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Participants tend to be highly educated, white, upper middle

class, and in a union with a primary partner (Barker & Langdridge, 2010; Sheff, 2011; Sheff, 2015). As a white cisgender, educated female, my positionality and privilege would have impacted recruitment in terms of who may have felt comfortable being interviewed. Academic privilege and positionality have been said to contribute to homogeneity (i.e. majority highly educated, white, and upper middle class) in other study samples about non-monogamy (Kleese, 2014; Sheff & Hammers, 2011). Yet I was able to recruit a somewhat diverse group of participants, in terms of their relationship structures, their education level and their economic status. This may be due to a wider social acceptance of polyamory.

The participants in this study are part of various polyamorous unions. Three were legally married to a spouse, two identified as "solo poly" (a form of polyamory that I will discuss in later chapters), five participants were living domestically with one or multiple partners. Seven participants had children of their own, while three were involved with partners who had children. Ten participants identified as bisexual, and three as queer. Two participants were poly but not currently involved with anyone. The majority of the participants did not subscribe to the hierarchical model of polyamory (e.g. have a primary and secondary partner, which will also be discussed further), but three used a hierarchical model to describe their version of polyamory. The remainder tried to challenge the hierarchical model by describing themselves as "egalitarian poly." Unlike other studies, participants did not all hold a university degree. Two had high school diplomas, three had community college diplomas, six had undergraduate degrees, two had some university experience, two had master's degrees and one had a PhD. I also managed to reach participants who were not all passing as monogamous, who are part of various dynamics

and who had experience in non-monogamous relationships ranging from very little to over twenty years of experience. Participants were relatively homogenous in terms of their race (they were all white or appeared to be so even if they did not explicitly identify as such).

3.5 ANALYSIS

I recorded (on my phone) and transcribed all interviews (except for one with a participant who wished to not be recorded; in this case, I took notes only). Interviews were then analyzed through open coding, a means of discovering key themes, values, and opinions in understudied topics (Berg, 2001). I did, however, focus coding on my research questions. I sought to learn how participants defined and made sense of their polyamorous practices, how they generally set up their relationship networks, and the specifics of these dynamics for each participant. I also sought to identify how participants felt about the representation of polyamory in the mainstream media, which generated important and interesting insights on stigma. Once I had identified these broad themes, I created lists of commonalities and differences in perspectives and linked these to my preliminary research questions. I then compared those findings to the literature. This process yielded three key findings about the various ways in which the participants live and give meaning to their polyamorous lives, which are explored in turn the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER 4: CREATING A PRACTICE THROUGH SELF-REFLECTION

Polyamory is an emerging relationship practice that deviates from societal monogamous norms (Anapol, 2010). Throughout the interviews for this study, participants told their biographical narratives of how they came to be polyamorous. How people engaged in polyamorous relationships varied; however, participants shared a focus on individual self-reflection in order to create relationships that would meet their needs. This chapter demonstrates that polyamory is the result of creating an individualized approach to love and relationship(s). Despite this individualization, there are shared ethics and challenges that participants experienced when creating their polyamorous relationship(s). I will demonstrate this first by showing the ways in which participants rejected monogamy, and how they struggled to identify an alternative way to create their relationship(s). Second, this chapter shows that polyamory is an individualized practice, and part of the process of defining how participants practice their new relationship approach is through "trial-by-fire." Participants also aim to adhere to a common code of ethics informed by respect, consent, honesty and communication to create their relationship boundaries. Due to the broad boundaries, participants have space to create their own models of polyamory, while still adhering to the shared code of ethics. Finally, I demonstrate how participants created their dynamics to be fluid and flexible to address changing needs in their relationship(s) without those relationship(s) needing to come to a complete end. Ultimately, polyamory and the individualized approach that participants take to define how they practice it speaks to the broader cultural shift of how North Americans are practicing love and intimacy in the twenty-first century: through individual self-fulfillment. To begin, I will explore how participants came to practice polyamory for the first time through rejection of monogamy.

4.1 EARLY EXPLORATIONS OF POLYAMORY: NAVIGATING A PRACTICE WITH LIMITED MODELS

This section explores participants' experiences of rejecting monogamy in order to pursue a lifestyle that better suits their individual needs. Participants noted how difficult it can be to practice polyamory without the language to describe what they want. They wanted something other than monogamy but figuring out that "something" was a complicated process. This section dives into the early stages of the process participants go through to identify their needs. I will first show how some participants discovered polyamory and experienced a sense of joy when they found a relationship practice other than monogamy. I will then discuss the difficulties that some of them experienced when trying this practice for the first time with limited understanding of what it was going to look like. Some participants felt extremely isolated before discovering polyamory as a practice.

People who practice polyamory have chosen a practice without well-defined rules or a framework on which to model their relationships (Hardy & Easton, 2017). It often takes time for people to realize that polyamory is an option, meanwhile living an unsatisfied life of serial monogamy. Several participants identified this as a problem they experienced before exploring polyamory. For example, Jessica talked about how they[3] always knew that they were non-monogamous. Jessica explained that they were not able to explore this earlier because they did not know that it was an option:

> I didn't have words for it or knowledge of it even existing, but I grew up with a real sense of "you can love anybody regardless of anything, and why wouldn't you be able to love multiple people?" It wasn't a kind of

[3] During the interviews, I asked participants their preferred pronouns that I use for this study.

> fully formed thing… there weren't clearly defined rules about that in my own head, but there was really no language in my head to really think about it and articulate it so I could be like, "oh yeah that's me".

Without a language to articulate their feelings of wanting to be polyamorous, Jessica went on living in a monogamous relationship for many years. Having these continuous feelings of wanting to be non-monogamous eventually led to the breakdown in their monogamous relationship. Jessica explains, “I felt like I kind of got stuck in my growing as a person when I was in that relationship… I kind of got whisked away along that path of normalcy, and that wasn’t me. And so, I think that when I started realizing that, that relationship started breaking down.” Jessica worked on their relationship for many years but realized that monogamy was no longer what they wanted. Jessica was introduced to polyamory by a friend who is now their partner, Edward. Jessica then entered a romantic relationship with Edward with the explicit intention of setting it up as polyamorous:

> So, I went in eyes wide open knowing that he was poly, and that was just what I was getting into. I had never had any experience actually actively being poly, or you know, knew anybody [else doing it] or anything. I knew nothing about the actual real reality of that other than just the ingrained stuff that was just in me. So, I went in with eyes wide open, and there were a lot of struggles early on.

Although Jessica felt trapped in their monogamous relationship and wanted to practice polyamory, the transition was difficult. Once they formed this polyamorous relationship, they experienced many challenges due to the importance of understanding each person’s individualized needs and the lack of unifying language surrounding the practice.

One key source of difficulty in becoming polyamorous is how individually defined the practice is; this leads to a lack of unifying language. This is demonstrated by Bart and Loraine, who are newly polyamorous. Bart highlights his difficulties meeting other people who practice the same form of polyamory:

> There doesn't seem to be a language to describe [polyamory] even the people who are living it can't define it in a way to communicate it to each other, so we are making up words… I think it's important to come up with some sort of mutually agreed-upon dialogue, or dictionary terms in so far that we can tell each other what we're interested in without long paragraphs of description.

Due to the individualized nature of the practice, it can be difficult to build relationships with other polyamorous folks who do not share the same definition of the practice, and have not fully defined what this practice is going to look like for them. Bart experiences difficulties when meeting others and explaining he and his partner's version of polyamory, even to those who also identify as poly because it is something that he and Loraine are still trying to define themselves. Bart and Loraine are still developing their understanding of what polyamory looks like for them; this is difficult to do with a lack of knowledge and models to learn from.

Indeed, Edward highlights this point. Edward explains that he found monogamy too constraining based on the abuse his mother endured from his father in their marriage. Seeing his father behave this way, he decided that he wanted to pursue a completely different life by rejecting monogamy. He explains that "the structure [of the nuclear family] I inherited as a child seemed flawed to me and it was so absolute and there was so

little room for negotiation, and it seemed so profoundly unfair, that I just couldn't go with it*"*. He explains that rejecting heteronormative values was why he wanted to be polyamorous, while also acknowledging that he had to create his own model because there was no template on how to do it:

> So, when you're a non-monogamous person, or I guess I should just say poly, because I didn't learn the word poly until my 30s. There was no pursuit of an ideal that I learned about from somebody else... it's very organic. So yeah… you can just see it as a rejection of prior structure and values in an attempt to find... specifically a gendered, more equitable gendered structure to relationships. And you have to start with well "who has all the power?" Okay well let's cut that out. What does that look like then if that person doesn't have the power... what does it look like then? People are able to be free, but you need to be willing to let them go. If you're not willing to let them go it won't work.

Edward had to create his own example of how to pursue non-monogamous relationships. Edward was one of the only participants who touched on his upbringing as a reason why he rejected monogamy and instead decided to pursue a non-monogamous lifestyle. He along with a few other participants associated monogamy with gendered power structures, which he rejected in order to create his own template for how he wanted to pursue polyamory. Edward's narrative demonstrates the individualized approach participants took to forming a practice that suited their needs and ideals.

In sum, participants felt non-monogamy suited their needs and desires better than monogamy. Prior studies reflect similar attitudes from participants (Anapol, 2010; Barker

& Langdridge, 2010; Jackson & Scott, 2014), with some researchers also noting an increased interest in non-monogamy beginning in the 1980s (around the same time as participants like Edward) as a way of challenging the nuclear family structure. Beyond exploring monogamous couples' decisions to open-up their marriages, none of these studies offer in-depth accounts of constructing a polyamorous identity. The participants in this study highlighted that once they rejected monogamy, they needed to begin the process of identifying how they wanted to pursue an alternative relationship practice which was challenging. Through the narratives of Jessica, Bart and Edward, this section demonstrated how participants identified that monogamy did not suit their individual needs and desires leading them to reject it. They were often excited about this, but they also struggled to define a new practice that was going to meet their individual needs and desires. The ways in which participants initiated this process was through a trial-by-fire approach.

4.2 BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Building on the previous section, I will now demonstrate the way in which participants created their individualized approach to polyamory. This section explores this process, which involves undergoing a period of self-reflection to redefine love and the way that polyamory was going to work for them. This section also shows how participants took a trial-by-fire approach to their relationships to figure out what relationship configurations would or would not meet their needs. Ultimately, this section reiterates that polyamory is an individualized practice that requires one to identify their own needs and boundaries first, in order to create a dynamic that works for all involved. It also demonstrates how this is not a practice that works for everyone.

Unlearning monogamous values is an integral part of the process to becoming polyamorous. Participants struggled at the beginning of creating their polyamorous dynamics because of the baggage of monogamy that they carried. Liz describes the continuous work that one must undergo to be polyamorous:

> Well we all carry the luggage with us of monogamy and so the expectations of what relationships should and should not look like… And so it isn't as simple as "I'm going to open my relationship up, and love multiple people" it's really taking a critical look at all of your luggage because we carry it with us all the time and that kind of personal, emotional labor… That's not something that can be done overnight, that's not something that can be done by putting someone else in your bed. That's not something that can be undone in a conversation or two or at a workshop or at a coffee. That is lifelong work.

Liz demonstrates how polyamory is constant work for the people who practice it that requires on-going individual self-reflection. Participants are negotiating boundaries for themselves, their comfort levels in what their partner(s) might do or not do; through this, they are creating a practice that aligns with the value of individual self-fulfillment. Because polyamory deviates from the norms of monogamy, it requires each person involved to reframe their thinking about love, jealousy, and commitment in their relationship(s).

Liz explains that doing polyamory requires one to build one's relationship(s) "from the inside-out". Part of doing this is through individual self-reflection and entirely redefining the idea of romantic love. Ruby is a participant who entered into a

polyamorous relationship because her partner (Baltic) had developed feelings for another person and wanted to explore that. She and Baltic have now been together for sixteen years and polyamorous for most of their relationship. She explains that being polyamorous "really requires a redefinition of terms and then once you actually have redefined those terms, can actually make sense of those terms, and put 'okay this is what poly is for me'… that's still… I'm still working on that myself." She continues, expanding on the definition of love itself, "once you redefine what love is for yourself, and what that looks like and means for you, then it starts to make sense. Love itself is very normative, the notion of love is very normative. The way we define it, see it and acknowledge it." Most participants echoed how they must individually define polyamory and love in a way that best suits them and their needs. Ruby is still working on this process even after practicing polyamory for many years. This demonstrates the ongoing nature of the self-reflection that participants go through in order to create relationship dynamics that works for them.

Beyond redefining love, Jessica also discussed the need to reframe their thinking when they were feeling jealous. As previously mentioned, Jessica had always inherently felt non-monogamous. However, they still needed to reframe their thinking about love and deal with feelings of jealousy when their partner was with someone else. In our interview, they discussed how they reframed their thoughts when they were feeling jealous:

> I would use like healthy distraction sometimes…to frame something in a different way. Especially when we were not living together it was like "I wouldn't be with you right now anyway, so what is upsetting me about

> you being with somebody else right now? Like that person's not taking you time away from me anyway so what am I getting so upset about? I'm not getting any less love from you when I'm with you, and I'm not seeing you any less because you're out spending time with someone else." So, I think that framing of "something is not being taken away from me, or you don't feel differently about me…"

Jessica had to reframe their thinking about their jealous feelings. They did so by indicating that they were not treated any differently when they and their partner were spending time together. They challenged their thinking about why they were feeling that way to cope with their feelings of jealousy. These feelings are not always easy to navigate, but they often inform boundaries that participants place on their relationships.

Boundaries can differ depending on the relationship. For instance, participants explained that often circumstances and situations can vary by partner. Many participants have multiple partners with varying needs and boundaries. Liz talks about the need to create distinct relationships within her dynamics Liz illustrates how circumstances and situations can vary by partner:

> Everyone is their own individual. Everybody has different needs, everybody has different schedules, everybody has a career or school or other partners. All my partners have other partners and they may or may not have children. You can't treat it like a cookie cutter type of thing, each relationship is built really truly individually from the inside out and then built upon itself.

This idea lends flexibility to the expectations placed on partners(s) and facilitates defining relationships according to the individualized needs of all those involved. Furthermore, this makes room for negotiations between partners about what that relationship can do for those involved. This approach comes from trying out boundaries and readjusting them as the relationship progresses. Some participants called this a "trial-by-fire" approach. It is worth noting that participants often referred to their approach as "trial-by-fire" instead of trial and error, even in their less extreme examples. This dramatic language might say something of the intensity to the participants, so I continue to use this language throughout the chapter. Liz contextualizes this approach:

> It just requires a lot of, looking for outside help [within the poly community] and then trying to put that into practice, and if it doesn't work try again...and if it doesn't work try again… and if that doesn't work, keep trying, and you keep trying and you keep working at it and it's always a work in progress because...again going back to try to do it differently and trying to do it better.

Liz illustrates the commitment that she has to making a polyamorous lifestyle work for her. She is committed to trying various approaches to make her relationship(s) work. She also seeks help from others within the community; this strategy came up in Elisabeth Sheff's study *The Polyamorists Next Door* (2015). Due to polyamory being a subculture and stigmatized, poly folks must often seek help from others within the community who understand the practice (Sheff, 2015). Although people seek guidance from their own community, what may work for the mentors might not work for the mentees.

Other participants discussed how they took a trial-by-fire approach in order to renegotiate boundaries. For example, Ruby echoes a trial-by-fire approach when referring to a time when Baltic broke a boundary by having sex with his new partner. She explains her thought process when considering how she wanted to react to this development:

> But he told me straight away and you know he said, "I'm really sorry, I know that's what you needed, and I wasn't able to do it". What do we do from here? And so, I said well I'm gonna need to think about it. And I took a week and I thought about it and I decided that if agreeing to it, I knew this was going to happen eventually, trial-by-fire so now I either accept it and move forward or we end the relationship and I wasn't ready to end the relationship because I still cared about him so we moved forward from there.

Ruby was able to continue her relationship and adjust her comfort levels as a result of a boundary being broken and her partner not hiding that fact from her. Not everyone is able to adapt to the trial-by-fire approach, however, and may feel that polyamory is not for them as a result.

John is newly exploring polyamory with his wife. Previously, they had an open marriage with strict boundaries that deterred them from creating emotional bonds. His wife recently met someone with whom she began to develop an emotional bond, breaking a boundary between herself and John:

> So yeah, the one boundary that we agreed upon was the one that was broken so.... it still stings a little and is just not consistent with the person I know she's been for 13 years…. So, there was a period maybe two

> weeks ago, when I was thinking, intellectually, I'm there, but maybe emotionally I'm just not on a point in the bell curve that I can handle it. I can see if I were in a position where I knew I was fairly self-fulfilled, and I wasn't having a problem with a partner, I would be like okay. Maybe I just don't have the emotional makeup to achieve that. So, I don't foreclose on the idea, but I might step away from it in the future, I just don't think that's where I am now.

John is an example of someone who is experiencing polyamory for the first time and still figuring out if it is something that he wants to explore. At the time of the interview, he and his wife were trying to navigate their relationship now that the boundary had been broken. John was working individually to try to figure out if polyamory was a practice that would suit his needs and desires. Dealing with these issues greatly involves doing work on the individual self and maintaining a commitment to a polyamorous lifestyle. This can be seen through Liz and her first attempts at being polyamorous.

Liz highlighted her experience when she first started to try polyamory and how she had multiple failed attempts before finding something that worked for her. Through this, she also illustrates the trial-by-fire approach and how often some of these relationships will end in fire:

> There was a couple of attempts tried and failed in different ways at different times either in a relationship with somebody who also had a domestic partner, and that kind of fell apart spectacularly. It was truly awful, but it was a learning experience, right? And so, you kind of stumble your way through it because there's no scripts for this. You

> stumble your way through it until you find something that works…and it really wasn't until my domestic relationship with a partner who I was with for 15 years and in conversation with them about.... You know how do we imagine this for ourselves? How do we start talking about it in ways that make sense for us? And very bluntly saying "okay so I want to have this relationship with you, but I also want to have another relationship with this other person and I don't want that relationship to end because we're together now".

Similar to other participants, not all relationship(s) work right away when trying to navigate a marginalized relationship practice. Liz continues, "so, a lot of my experiences are born out of having these conversations and figuring out what I needed and then having partners who are receptive to those kinds of things and then creating something literally from the inside-out because there's no models for this." Liz shows how polyamory can be a multi-faceted process of unlearning monogamous values, understanding what one needs as an individual to be fulfilled and how it can take multiple attempts to create a relationship that works for all involved. To explore polyamory, participants take a trial-by-fire approach that sometimes works and results in the expansion of boundaries, and sometimes costs a relationship.

This section demonstrated how participants needed to build their relationships from the inside out; they needed to reflect on their needs and values while taking into consideration the needs of their partners in order to negotiate a relationship configuration that works for them. To figure out what this looks like in practice, participants can take a trial-and-error approach or a trial-by-fire approach to understand what they could

emotionally cope with as individuals, and what they could not. Trial-by-fire often leads to broken boundaries and participants had to assess if they were willing to renegotiate those boundaries. This process was not something that everyone was able to deal with and sometimes cost multiple relationships before finding a relationship that would work for all involved. Ultimately, polyamorous relationships are created first with an understanding of one's individual needs; they are then negotiated, as those involved create and sometimes break boundaries. Through this process the individual must assess what they are willing to negotiate to move forward and what they are not. At the same time, it is expected that partner(s) involved understand their own personal needs and clearly communicate those needs to their partners(s).

4.3 RESPECT, HONESTY, CONSENT AND COMMUNICATION

This section will explore the highly individualized way that participants defined and practiced polyamory while also adhering to what I call a "code of ethics". This code of ethics creates general expectations for those involved in polyamorous relationship(s). Furthermore, this section demonstrates how people who are polyamorous set out to build their relationships through these ethics rather than use them as tools which can be difficult for them to do. Before discussing this process of negotiation, I will first clarify what I mean by a code of ethics.

Participants and researchers have not referred to these principles and values explicitly as "a code of ethics". This is a term that I adopt because participants often referred to the same principles assertively and without question. During the interviews, participants were quick to recite the same general principles of respect, consent, honesty, and communication. These general principles have also been identified in previous academic studies (Anapol, 2010; Barker, 2005; Dominguez, Pujol, Motzkau, & Popper,

2017; Noël, 2006) and in books such as *The Ethical Slut* (Hardy & Easton, 2017). Going forward, I will refer to these common principles and values as a code of ethics. Through the code of ethics, participants are able to further create boundaries and customize their approach to polyamory.

Participants often evoked this code of ethics when describing their relationship boundaries. Jenna and her husband date other people together and identify as polyamorous. In our interview, Jenna is careful to distinguish what she and her husband are doing from other forms of consensual non-monogamies, such as swinging; she does so by emphasizing the importance of respect:

> I have a friend who is a swinger and that wouldn't appeal to me at all, like going to a party where you don't know anyone and just like the randomness of it, for me, cause I need an emotional connection to a person, that wouldn't work. Like, there has to be at least a friendship and a respect of each other... I'm not sayin' that I'm judging it or anything, it just isn't for me. I'm not programmed that way.

Jenna cites the idea of having a friendship built on respect and trust which she uses as a way to differentiate what she does from other forms of consensual non-monogamies. She indicated that a more intimate bond could be fostered between polyamorous partners when they value and respect each other; this is integral to what being polyamorous means to her.

Other participants describe their version of polyamory in similar ways but emphasize other key principles. In contrast to Jenna, Stormy, emphasizes the importance of communication. When I asked her whether any boundaries or rules influence the way

in which she practices polyamory, she emphasized communication as being of the utmost importance:

> First off, [I make sure] that everybody is on the same page. So within my… anchor partner relationship, the person who I'm with the most, we went into that relationship very much as a "this is what we want to do with it and that includes building other people into it". And partners who he was already with, you know, I made sure that I connected with them as well so there are no secrets in our little polycule[4], you know we are very open and very communicative and that's a really important piece with me.

Stormy wants to ensure that everyone involved in her dynamic, or other dynamics she is a part of, has knowledge of the relationship(s) and takes care to communicate across all involved parties. Jenna and Stormy both used the code of ethics to describe the boundaries that they place on their relationships. Other studies have shown that communication is the most important component of polyamorous relationships and are what polyamorous people cite as a value (Anapol, 2010; Constantine & Constantine, 1973; Sheff, 2015).

Like communication, honesty is important to participants, but this seemed to be the most difficult ethic to practice, especially for participants navigating conversations about being polyamorous in a currently monogamous relationship. Honesty is a core

[4] Polycule means the non-monogamous network of people a person is associated with. It can include partners and partner's partners (metamours).

component of polyamory as this is what differentiates it from infidelity.[5] Most people come into polyamory from an originally monogamous relationship (Dominguez, Pujol, Motzkau, & Popper, 2017) therefore, they need to open up to their partners about their desires at the risk of hurting and, even losing, their partner. It was important to participants to uphold these ethics and use them as a foundation of which to create their relationship rather than a tool. Baltic's story of sharing his desire to be non-monogamous with his then monogamous partner illustrates this well. He describes how difficult it was to open up to her about this desire in a way that would also protect her feelings:

> And that can be really difficult for a partner to process and it was also difficult for me to open up about it because of course, you're self-conscious about stuff. How do I tell this person, they're not the only one I want to bone? You know, from a sexual standpoint that's one thing, but how do I tell them that I have a giant heart that I want to share with other people.

To be polyamorous, Baltic needed to be honest with his monogamous partner; at the same time, this honesty had great potential to hurt her feelings. Wanting to be honest and respectful of his partner could have thus paradoxically ended this relationship. Baltic was willing to take this risk and be honest about his desire to pursue polyamory as a lifestyle. Upholding the code of ethics through honesty was of the utmost importance even if that meant hurting his partner's feelings.

[5] Infidelity happens when a partner pursues a relationship (sexual or emotional) outside of their dyad without their partner knowing.

Respect, consent, honesty and communication are characteristics that inform a general code of ethics in the polyamorous community.[6] Polyamorous folks have had to establish their own roles and rules to create a framework for the practice due to the lack of pre-existing language and models. By keeping this framework broad, individuals are able to negotiate what works for their particular needs and what does not, something that I will touch on in the following section. As many people who begin this practice generally want to deviate from the constraints of monogamy, these shared values evolved into a broad code of ethics rather than a set of specific rules applying to all who adapt the term. Other than this code of ethics, the dynamics people participate in can look very different. This results in an individualized approach to the practice. The next section will discuss how the creation of these broad boundaries allow for relationships to become fluid and flexible, further demonstrating how the practice of polyamory can adapt to meet individual needs and desires.

4.4 RELATIONSHIP FLUIDITY

The previous sections discussed how participants create their own individual approach to polyamory informed by individual self-reflection and a broad code of ethics. This code of ethics is not always easy to follow but participants deem it important to living a polyamorous life. Another way polyamory becomes individualized is by creating relationships that are fluid and flexible. This section demonstrates how creating fluid and flexible relationship dynamics gives participants the opportunity to create relationships that both meet their individual needs and the needs of their partners(s). Relationship fluidity and flexibility were mentioned predominantly by participants who had been

[6] When referring to "community" I mean people who are part of this general sub-culture.

polyamorous for many years, thus had a more defined picture of what they wanted their practice to look like in comparison to participants who were still in their early years of polyamory. Ultimately this section argues that polyamory is a practice with fluid and flexible dynamics fostering relationships that can adapt to better meet the needs of the individuals involved, without coming to an end.

Relationship fluidity is an extremely important factor in how Liz constructs her relationships. She emphasizes fluidity when talking about negotiating boundaries within her dynamic. She explains:

> [Polyamory] allows more fluidity and flexibility in your relationships over time and because people's interests change, people's needs change, and, for a number of reasons, people change. So in order to be fluid and flexible, and meet the needs and desires of people over time, you have to allow the relationship itself to change and so by seeing it as something that is on a continuum rather than a spectrum itself, then your relationship can look like whatever it wants to look like as you need it.

Some participants sought to incorporate consideration of how people, including themselves, change along with their needs into their relationship dynamics. This is a way that polyamory becomes individually defined. Participants identify their needs and develop an understanding of what their partner(s) need. Once these are identified, a relationship and how it functions may change without coming to an end.

Liz demonstrates this fluidity at work in the context of a previous relationship. As people who are polyamorous create their dynamics on an individual level, having fluid and flexible dynamics creates an opportunity for relationship(s) to shift and change rather

than ending. Liz speaks about a six-year relationship with one of her partners to demonstrate the fluidity of her relationship(s):

> So, I can think of a relationship I had for six years. When I first started a relationship with a person they started as a sexual or romantic partner, they became in addition to that, they then became a play partner and then they became a domestic partner and so they were all of those things. And then over time that configuration changed, and we stopped living together, but they were still a romantic and sexual partner and that changed again.

Throughout the six years, the configuration of Liz's relationship with this individual shifted and changed multiple times without coming to a definitive end. This fluidity and flexibility are not typical in monogamous relationships but are characteristic of polyamory.

Stormy pointed out that relationship fluidity was something she valued about polyamory as a practice. She explained: "So I think [fluidity] that's also a very beautiful thing that unfortunately monogamy, the way that it's done socially right now, doesn't possess. It's very structured and it would be great to see monogamy opened up a little bit and be a little more fluid, and relaxed". As polyamory deviates from a rigid and structured practice, such as monogamy, participants are able to create and negotiate boundaries within their relationship(s) in order to suit the individual needs of all involved. Fluid and flexible relationships demonstrate that participants can continue to construct their dynamics in such a way that met their particular needs and desires while also meeting their partners(s) needs. This was true especially of participants, like Liz and Stormy, who had both practiced polyamory for at least five years, meaning that they had had more time than others to

develop an approach to polyamory that worked for them. May was another participant who gave an example of how she enabled herself to create relationship(s) that were fluid and flexible by expanding her definition of love.

May showed how her relationships were fluid and flexible by having a broad definition of love. She explained, that for her, polyamory was a matter of "welcoming any type of love that's out there. So sometimes it's romantic relationships, sometimes its sexual relationships, sometimes it's just friendships. But it's not limiting any type of love for me, so I just let a relationship develop as it's going to." Similar to Liz, May creates her relationship(s) without a particular trajectory in mind, indicating that she too ensures that there is space for both her and her partner(s) needs to be met in a way that is fluid and flexible.

Participants who were newer to polyamory were less likely to conceptualize their relationships as fluid and flexible. They had a different approach, which seemed to be shaped by the fact that they were still in the process of trying to identify their individual needs. For example, when I asked Loraine about boundaries, she explained:

> We're very just let things happen and don't put any expectations. I think expectations are one thing in all relationships that really hurt relationships. I mean you do have to have some expectations but I think once you let go of having like really specific expectations is when things can have more potential to have something that is really good and there's less chance of...you know upset or anything like that. So yeah, I guess um you know...boundaries wow. I don't really think about this a lot...

Loraine is still trying to rationalize her transition to a polyamorous dynamic and therefore focuses on both readjusting the expectations that she places on relationships and on identifying her individual needs. This was a markedly different response from participants who had been practicing polyamory for several years, who emphasized the importance of being fluid and flexible with boundaries.

Polyamory is an individualized practice that presents participants with the opportunity to create fluid and flexible relationship(s) to meet their shifting needs. Participants' ability to ensure both their needs are met and the needs of their partners(s) is through creating flexible dynamics. This becomes more evident the longer people practice polyamory as they are better able to articulate their individual needs within their relationships.

4.5 AN ON-GOING SERACH FOR SELF-FULFILLMENT

This chapter demonstrated the ways in which participants reject monogamy and embark on a process of individual self-reflection to identify how they will create their polyamorous dynamics in a predominantly monogamous world. Participants indicated that they knew they did not want to be monogamous, but had difficulties articulating to themselves and their partner(s) how to meet their needs. As a result, they unlearned monogamous values of love and intimacy and took a trial-by-fire approach to discover how polyamory could work in a way that met their individual needs and desires. Governed by a broad code of ethics, participants create and negotiate boundaries to inform their dynamics while ensuring both their needs and the needs of partner(s) are being met. They are able to meet needs primarily through creating fluidity and flexibility in ways that alter the configuration and nature of a relationship without it coming to an end.

Ultimately this chapter shows that polyamory requires that those who practice it undergo a process of self-reflection. In this vein, polyamory can be seen as a relationship practice that speaks to broader cultural changes of how North Americans practice love and intimacy. Indeed, by deviating from monogamy in pursuit of individual self-fulfillment, participants needed to define and articulate their relationships with their individual needs at the center of that. Participants underwent and are still undergoing a process of self-reflection in order to build relationships that meet their needs and desires, while also negotiating with their partners to ensure their needs are fulfilled.

CHAPTER 5: CREATING POLYAMOROUS RELATIONSHIPS IN A MONOGAMOUS SOCIETY

The previous chapter explored how people use a broad code of ethics in their polyamorous relationships in order to achieve individual self-fulfillment and model these relationship(s) in a way that suits their individual needs. This chapter investigates how these relationship structures function in practice. Specifically, this chapter demonstrates how the subculture of polyamory has intentionally shifted away from a hierarchical model in favour of creating egalitarian polyamorous relationships. Additionally, it shows the ways in which participants' abilities to achieve an egalitarian dynamic are limited by monogamous structures, monogamous values, and familial priorities. This chapter displays this first by exploring how participants minimize hierarchy within their relationship(s) by shifting away from hierarchical language, such as "primary" and "secondary". Instead, they strive for a dynamic between partners where everyone involved is equally loved, heard, and prioritized. This is often a central goal for people in polyamorous relationships, especially in more established relationships. Second, this chapter examines how monogamous institutions compromise these egalitarian ideals, often imposing the hierarchical structure which participants strive to minimize. Third, it illustrates how participants sometimes reinforce hierarchies in order to protect partners' feelings. Finally, the chapter describes how having children shapes the ways in which polyamorous unions function, often hindering the ideal of egalitarian polyamory for nondomestic partners. Ultimately, by describing how polyamorous unions function day-to-day, this chapter argues that although polyamorous values have shifted from the hierarchical model to favour egalitarian polyamory, monogamous institutions, ideals and

priorities continue to shape and limit participants' ability to be completely egalitarian in their relationship(s).

5.1 CREATING AN EGALITARIAN IDEAL

Although polyamorous relationships come in many shapes and configurations, a defining feature of these relationships among participants is the level of hierarchy between members of their polycule (a person's connected network of non-monogamous relationships). Many participants made a distinction between what they called "hierarchical" and "egalitarian" polyamory. Hierarchical polyamory describes relationships in which there are "primary" and "secondary" partnerships, and where the primary partnership typically holds more privilege and power than the other (Balzarini, et al., 2019). Balzarini et al. (2019) describe primary partners as a more interdependent pair in that "they typically live together and share finances, are married, and are raising children together if children were desired" (p.1750). On the other hand, secondary partners are typically less interdependent, living separately, managing their own finances and "are afforded relatively less time, energy, and priority in a person's life than primary partners" (Balzarini, et al., 2019, p. 1750). Primary partners have more power than secondary partners; for example, they may hold "veto power", meaning that they can say when they do not want their partner to become romantically involved with a particular person (Barker, 2005). This language implies that the needs of the primary partner are put above the needs of the secondary partner. Hierarchical polyamory introduces and unequal power dynamic into the relationship(s), necessarily leading to inequality between partners (Balzarini, et al., 2019; Jordan, Gorgan, Muruthi, & Bermudez, 2017; Sheff, 2015). In reaction against this kind of power imbalance, some participants avoid using hierarchical language, such as the terms "primary" and "secondary", to try to ensure

everyone in the dynamic feels equally loved. Conversely, some participants who were new to polyamory used hierarchical language such as "primaries" and "secondaries" as a tool to navigate between being fulfilled by spending time with their secondary partner, while providing emotional support to the primary partner. This section, however, addresses the desires many participants had to move away from hierarchy to an egalitarian polyamorous dynamic. Most of them did this through shifting their language.

Many of the participants rejected the hierarchical model and attempted to practice more egalitarian polyamorous relationships, which Melody described as, "where everyone is equal, and everyone is able to feel equal and equally loved." Throughout interviews, especially with those who had been in polyamorous relationships for many years, participants stressed egalitarian polyamory as an ideal and it became apparent that they strived for equal distribution of power in their relationships. Power in this context refers to the requests and demands for a partner's time and attention. This section shows how participants in long-standing polyamorous relationships attempt to achieve this equality in three key ways: through their everyday relationship dynamics; through their care with language; and through the boundaries they place around their relationship(s).

Stormy never explicitly said that her polycule was egalitarian, but it was evident through the way her dynamic functioned. She explained that her polycule meets quarterly to share their feelings and struggles:

> we all sit down together, and we all share what our feelings are. And we try to create sort of a nonjudgmental place for people to share those experiences and those feelings.... because sometimes feelings don't have reasons. And we have to acknowledge that as well....so we are actually

> finding that it is working quite well. We have only done a couple of those...especially now because our group has gotten a little bit bigger and more intensive.

Having everyone sit down together, even though they are not all dating each other, shows that there are efforts towards equal partnerships within their dynamic. This is an example of egalitarian poly; the efforts of creating equal space for people to share their thoughts and feelings and having everyone listen and provide support to one another no matter how long people have been involved in the dynamic nor what their living situations look like. In addition to family meetings, participants also made an effort to distance themselves from hierarchical language.

There has been a shift of terminology away from hierarchical language (Balzarini, et al., 2019). Participants tried to foster equality in their relationships through their deliberate use of language. Many participants use the term "anchor partner" instead of "primary partner" to describe a prioritized or domestic relationship. As Stormy explains, "for me, I have an anchor partner...and basically for me what an anchor partner is, is the person who I'm with the most often...umm so...some people use the term anchor partner to define the person they live with when they're trying to move away from hierarchical language". Ruby lives with her "anchor" partner, and echoes Stormy's reasoning for the choice of terminology: "I've only really had one or two other relationships besides my anchor partner...the terminology is kind of weird...I prefer anchor as opposed to primary because of hierarchy stuff". As these passages demonstrate, Ruby and Stormy intentionally move away from hierarchical language to be as inclusive as possible in their dynamics. The term "anchor partner" can still evoke some hierarchy as it implies

someone taking priority, such as time spent together or sharing a home, but there is still an effort to minimize the language associated with hierarchy.

Other participants did not use the term "anchor partner" but made similar attempts to move away from hierarchical language by encouraging their partners to choose their own labels. For example, Michael lives with a domestic partner and shares a home with her. This partner is also involved with caring for his son from a previous marriage. When talking about his relationships, he did not use the word "primary" or "anchor". Instead, he offers the opportunity for people he dates to choose their own label:

> I find that it's very important to be particular about the words that you use because different words obviously convey different meaning and for me to continuously say Partner, especially in a community where people jump all over terms that they want to use, I think it's very important to make clear and take the opportunity to define terms along the way that I feel comfortable using… So, when I then would see other people ask the question being what do you call other people? Do you say primary partner? Well that isn't the narrative that [my partner and I] want to project for people and that's not the way that we want to present ourselves because we are certainly open to other people having that level of commitment to ourselves, to each other, to our particular inner personal dynamic and so it became a very case by case basis.

Michael and his partner are open to living with other people they date, so they try to stay away from hierarchical language to communicate this egalitarian dynamic and their openness to having multiple partner(s) sharing a domestic space. However, he does not

feel comfortable calling everyone his “partner” and so gives the people he dates the opportunity to give themselves their own label. “I had somebody who decided they wanted to be called my date-mate. I’ve had girlfriend, I've had VIP...yeah and there are people who just say, “I’m your friend and we don't really have to get into it when people ask.” By offering the people he dates the autonomy to choose what they prefer to be called, Michael sets up his relationships in a way that fosters flexible growth towards an egalitarian dynamic.

Some participants are explicitly uncomfortable with the hierarchical model and demonstrate how they have configured their relationship(s) in a more equitable way. Liz, who has been polyamorous the longest of the participants interviewed for this study, also identifies as egalitarian poly and refers to her partners as “partners”, eliminating any kind of implicit hierarchy. She describes her polyamory as egalitarian while discussing how she has few relationship “deal breakers”:

> No, I mean we talk about it, and terms we throw around in the poly community like "veto" and stuff like that. A veto is when a partner can throw a veto against another partner. But that sets up a hierarchy. I don't typically tend to arrange my relationships that way, my relationships could be defined as egalitarian poly. I typically don't even think about them in terms of primary or secondary or any of those things.

Liz illustrates how hierarchy can impact relationships such as giving a primary partner permission to tell their partner that they can or cannot date a certain person. She further explains that she is egalitarian. While describing her relationships, she was sure to only assign descriptive language to categorize the function of her relationships, meaning that

she did not say “anchor” but domestic, sexual and play partnerships. She referred to them in different categories, but as demonstrated in the previous chapter, these categories are fluid and flexible, and typically not mutually exclusive. Liz expands on her partner categories and this flexibility:

> That's how I configure my relationships: domestic and sexual, romantic and play and some of them can be one of those things, and some of those can be a couple of those things, or all of those things. And, on top of that, I'm also a mentor in the community. So, I also have mentoring relationships as well and I consider those to be partners as well because they are my peers and they're my partners who I have been with for a number of years and so they become partners to me.

By describing her partnerships through these categories, Liz is careful not to show preference of one partnership over another. She looks at her relationships as partnerships that occupy one, or multiple categories that define their functions within her dynamics. She approaches her relationships in such a way that she can attempt to adhere to an egalitarian ideal.

Participants who have been polyamorous for many years talked about how they try to configure their relationship(s) to be as egalitarian as possible. This was done through the creation of family meetings, shifting away from hierarchical language, through ensuring new partners have the autonomy to define and label their new relationship, and by using descriptive language to create categories of partners by their function rather than their priority. By doing so, these participants challenge relationship hierarchy and ensure that the people they date feel that they hold equal power in the

dynamic. This section highlighted that there is a an egalitarian ideal within the polyamorous community. Those who have been practicing polyamory for many years, have taken measures to reduce hierarchy within their relationships, instead striving to create egalitarian dynamics. This egalitarian ideal can be difficult to achieve in practice. The following section explores the barriers egalitarian-oriented participants encounter while they try to navigate this relationship dynamic within predominantly monogamous social institutions.

5.2 MONOGAMOUS SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

In the previous section, we explored how participants try to facilitate their dynamics to be as inclusive and egalitarian as possible. Although egalitarian polyamory and the ideal of diminishing hierarchy in their relationship dynamics was a goal for many, the participants also encountered some notable limitations. As Willis (2019) explains, "[m]ono-normativity is built into everyday institutions including the housing market, marriage, medical institutions, and narrative closure within media" (Willis, 2019, p. 512). Polyamory is a practice that is constrained by monogamous institutions which can lead to unintentional hierarchy within egalitarian poly relationship(s). Studies have shown that poly folks will take the path of least resistance and create unintentional hierarchy within extradyadic relationships while trying to find how their practice fits into broader society (Balzarini, et al., 2019; Willis, 2019). Liz highlighted this problem, "you look around, and everywhere we look, is the expectation of monogamy. Everywhere we look. Every social institution, every legal institution, health organizations, everything is set up to support and maintain couples." Due to society privileging the couple, there are inherent hierarchies that can conflict with the egalitarian model polyamory people seek to cultivate. This section demonstrates the ways in which those who try to achieve

egalitarian polyamory are often faced with decisions which involve privileging one partner over the other, which shapes an inherent hierarchy within polyamorous relationship(s).

Some participants highlighted this issue by illustrating their financial obligations to their domestic partners. Michael who wants to stray away from hierarchical language expresses, most explicitly of all the participants, that there are social institutions in place that shape one's relationships to be hierarchical:

> I recognize that inherently, at least from my standpoint, that if you have someone that you live with or someone that you have financial obligations with, there is always a hierarchy. You can try and make it as relationship anarchist as you want, but I have a son, clearly my son is a priority. I have a partner I pay bills with; clearly that's something that takes precedence over someone I'm just getting to know, you know?

Michael recognizes that new relationships would not take precedent over pre-existing ones with whom he shares financial and domestic obligations. The partner with whom he shares these obligations holds more power than partners with whom he does not share obligations. This creates an inherent hierarchy within his dynamic. Should his dynamic change to integrate someone else in their domestic shared space, this would help create a more egalitarian relationship.

Other participants highlighted the hierarchy in their dynamic by expressing the need to choose one partner over the other to use their work benefits. Baltic lives with Ruby, and has multiple partners in his polycule, which he describes as egalitarian. Sometimes he experiences issues with achieving an egalitarian dynamic due to broader

monogamous social institutions. For instance, Baltic needed to make a decision when he was denied a discount card for multiple partners as part of the perks of a job that he used to work. He explains his difficulties navigating this situation:

> I don't want to put one [partner] above the other by saying one can have the discount card, and one cannot. If that is the way that it has to be then I will make the decision and that's fine, but if I could get one for each that would have been the way to go. It didn't work out that way, so I gave the discount card to one of them.

This also happened with his benefits; he had to choose one partner to cover because he was unable to cover both. Although Baltic subscribes to an egalitarian model, because of the ways that society has designed institutions such as health care, hierarchy persists in the relationship(s).

Although participants reject hierarchical language and attempt to work towards an egalitarian polyamory, they face difficulties when translating these ideas into practice due to pre-existing social institutions. Other studies have found that their participants had similar viewpoints about hierarchy and having to make choices in a society that will create a hierarchy within an otherwise egalitarian polyamorous relationship. For example, Balzarini, et al., (2019) found that even though close to half of the participants in their studies rejected hierarchical terminology, resource allocation in relationships still imposed a hierarchy on polyamorous relationship(s)(p. 1765). Resource allocation speaks to biological resources such as food, and shelter which are bought with shared financial resources; this allocation also includes emotional resources. Some participants set up a more intentional hierarchy in order to protect the feelings of their spouses or their own

feelings if they were not as comfortable being polyamorous at the time. The next section explores the creation of intentional hierarchy in order to protect the feelings of those involved in a polyamorous dynamic who may still be struggling with unlearning cultural monogamous values.

5.3 INTENTIONAL HIERARCHY

Many participants who had been practicing polyamory for years saw equality as the ideal to strive for but for those newer to polyamory, this was not the case. Participants who were relatively new to polyamory often evoke hierarchical language to protect the emotions of the partner who is least comfortable with the new arrangement. In addition to laws in place, the mainstream messages society communicates about romantic relationships through television, literature, and movies, typically portray romantic relationships as a monogamous and unique bond between two individuals (Ritchie, 2010; Swidler, 2001). Being continuously exposed to mono-normative values makes it difficult for people who are exploring non-monogamous relationships, polyamory especially, to unlearn one of the biggest values perpetuated across society: a one-and-only monogamous relationship (Dominguez, Pujol, Motzkau, & Popper, 2017; Frank & DeLamater, 2010; Willis, 2019).

As explored in the previous chapter, unlearning monogamous values is a process that all participants needed to go undergo in order to find a version of polyamory that suited their individual needs. This section explores how those entering polyamorous relationships for the first time organize their relationship(s) in a hierarchical fashion, and deliberately use hierarchical language to accommodate the partner least comfortable with the new arrangement. This section also looks at how people enter into polyamorous practices with the expectation of creating relationships with a secondary partner in a way

that does not sacrifice the unique bond formed between the primaries. As participants become more comfortable with polyamory over time, they also begin to adjust their desire to be in an egalitarian dynamic.

Intentional hierarchy is demonstrated through participants' accommodation of their primary partner when planning to spend time with their secondary partner. Loraine and Bart recently expanded their boundaries to incorporate emotional attachments because Loraine fell in love with someone else. Loraine talks about how she worked to accommodate Bart a little more than her secondary partner:

> It's kind of a matter of figuring out when it's appropriate to say "I want to go spend time with my secondary partner" because I don't have a lot of free time and that's been the toughest thing. So basically, the comfort seems to be that I spend time with my secondary partner when my primary partner is working or occupied because that seems to be where his comfort is. So, I just...because he's the least comfortable of the two of us with it...I kind of like try to accommodate him a little more than not.

Loraine tries to navigate her new relationship dynamic through the creation of intentional hierarchy. In order to protect Bart's feelings, she reserves time to spend with her secondary partner when Bart is busy doing other things. This shows how participants created intentional hierarchy in order to accommodate their primary partner's feelings and reassure them of their importance.

Some participants who are less comfortable with polyamory tried to rationalize their new relationship dynamic during the interview. Intentional hierarchy helped them to

process these changes. For example, Bart does not have a secondary partner and also indicates that he was the least comfortable with the new dynamic. He and Loraine used to be sexually non-monogamous and would often "play[7]" with other individuals while remaining emotionally monogamous with each other. He describes himself as undergoing unlearning monogamous values in this process and rationalizes his new polyamorous approach by remembering the significant age difference between Loraine and himself:

> There's probably a 40-year age difference between our life expectancies. It would be really nice if when I'm gone, she has someone to be with. So, I think that for her, this is excellent. And the new person in the relationship is an excellent human being…so whatever personal hesitations and objections I have, and feelings of "well fuck I thought it was just you and I in this together emotionally and we play" now I don't feel like [that].

He continued:

> So, it's my job not to give her grief about that and demand her attention back, but more to re-evaluate and reposition my own thinking to come to terms with it, because I think that in the overall long-term situation, it's a net benefit. If I really, really do care about [Loraine], I think it's a super net benefit in her life. And if I have to … sacrifice a little bit of... the idea of uniqueness of our love for her to have a longer term happiness and to be paired with someone who is awesome as well, especially if I get sick or if I die, that is a good thing.

[7] Play is a term used in the kink community to refer to BDSM practices.

Loraine accommodates Bart's feelings in order to help him adjust to their new norm and reframe his thinking beyond the monogamous values to which he previously adhered, so that Bart can manage his feelings while his partner experiences the excitement of a new relationship. He felt threatened that a dimension of their love now needed to be sacrificed in order to accommodate a new partner coming into Loraine's life. The hierarchical model creates space for more than one relationship, while giving the primary partner a sense of security within the dynamic. Emotional management while partners unlearn monogamous values shapes the dynamics into a hierarchical model, and the participants use this to justify their choice, as demonstrated by Loraine and Bart.

Monogamous values can also manifest in unrealistic expectations placed on a secondary partner. A common term thrown around in the poly community is "unicorn hunting", where a couple is looking for a female hot-bi babe (HBB) to enter into their dynamic as secondary partner without causing too much emotional disruption in the primary relationship (Sheff, 2015). In this configuration, hierarchy is intentional and is shaped by the adherence to some monogamous values by privileging the couple. Furthermore, it is often unobtainable. The HBB is unobtainable because of the unrealistic expectations placed on her, such as staying out of the way of the primary relationship, while helping out with the household, living there domestically and by simultaneously being attached to the couple, but not threatening the uniqueness of their love (Sheff, 2015). Studies have shown that couples who start into polyamorous relationships typically have the unrealistic expectations of finding an HBB and as time goes on, they either abandon the practice or adjust their expectations to be more inclusive (Sheff, 2015). This hierarchy and unrealistic expectations are likely due to the need for the individuals to

unlearn monogamous values which limit their ability to fully explore polyamorous relationships in an egalitarian way.

New to polyamory, Jenna and her husband are an example of participants looking for a unicorn. Jenna identifies as polyamorous with her husband. They have a hierarchical model because they date new people together, as a couple, even though Jenna did not invoke the specific language of "primary" and "secondary" in the interview. Due to her comfort level, she is the partner who draws boundaries and decides whether or not she and her husband are going to stop seeing a partner. She indicates that she does sometimes struggle when they meet a new partner because of her insecurities. She explained:

> Well, we always do everything together so for me, the hard thing was seeing him in that giddy, you know, like new relationship energy, the first time you see it you're like "I'm watching my husband fall in love with someone else" and that is heartbreaking. You're like "oh my god I'm losing you" but that's not what it is at all, you're into the excitement of the moment and that's all it is and he always put me first and he never made me feel like crap, I made myself feel like crap, you know?

Jenna and her husband seek form a bond with another person together. Similar to Bart, she needed to redefine what her relationship with her husband looks like, and still finds security by following a hierarchical model of polyamory. She points out that:

> I'm wired to be monogamous, but I have a bisexual side and so, but my husband is probably more wired to be poly and if it didn't hurt me at all, I think he would be fine with all kinds of things, but he holds back for

> me cause he knows that like it's not worth it for the pain it's going to cause me.

Jenna and her husband operate within a hierarchical dynamic that includes strict boundaries and veto power giving them the power over a new relationship that they might be exploring. This is further established by their rule of abstention from dating when her husband is away. They only date new people together, and they both have the ability to decide when to close the relationship when one of them becomes uncomfortable—their ultimate priority is their marriage. They have only recently started to explore these elements of polyamory, so their boundaries might become more lenient as time goes on and move towards a more egalitarian polyamorous dynamic should they meet someone who meets their needs. During interviews with other participants, I found that the longer participants were polyamorous the more they readjust their values in order to be more egalitarian in their relationship dynamics.

Indeed, June made this point explicit. June explains that when she was younger, she gravitated more toward a hierarchical polyamorous relationship:

> I think earlier on, in my poly lifestyle, I moved more naturally into the hierarchical model and I was often the secondary or tertiary and that worked for me where I was in my life then. As I get older I kind of look more for partnerships and move away more from...the hierarchy as much. But not to say that I would be opposed to that, if I was attracted to the right person, but yeah, I think it just changes with where you are in your life.

By moving away from the hierarchy, June leans to more equitable partnerships where her needs would not be second to the needs of others involved in her dynamic. In other words, she wants to be more valued than an HBB, by ensuring that her needs are met. June was the most flexible with what she felt comfortable with in terms of desire to be in an egalitarian or hierarchical union. However, as she gained experience with polyamory, she gravitated away from hierarchical relationships in order to create relationship(s) in which her needs are fully met. June talked about one's life stage also shaping the way in which polyamorous dynamics function. Other ways in which polyamorous dynamics become hierarchical is through familial priorities and responsibilities. The next section will demonstrate how egalitarian relationship(s) become limited through childrearing.

5.4 HOW CO-PARENTING SHAPES POLYAMOROUS DYNAMICS

Co-parenting in polyamorous relationship(s) impact the way in which those dynamics function and will place limitations on relationships that are not domestic. At the same time, co-parenting can create equality within the household dynamic by having shared responsibilities with finances and shared goals with child rearing. This section focuses on participants who value egalitarian polyamorous relationships but can achieve this to a limited extent because the wellbeing of their children shapes the dynamic to be more hierarchical. Not all parents are "out" to their children as polyamorous (this finding is addressed further in chapter six). The section focuses instead on participants raising their children in an open polyamorous home, and how this influences their domestic relationships to be more hierarchical than egalitarian.

The prioritization of domestic partnerships while raising children is seen in Edward's dynamic. Edward lives with his two domestic partners, both of whom he refers to as primary partners. In chapter four, we learned how Edward became polyamorous in

order to challenge gender norms; this also impacts hierarchy in relationships. He makes it very clear that he wants to have relationships in which partners feel safe to explore other relationships with few boundaries, which means that he holds egalitarian values. He and his partners are all single parents and are now co-parenting their children in the same home. When talking about how they introduce the children to partners outside of their domestic partnerships, he gives an example of his primary partner introducing her secondary partner to the children:

There was a schedule conflict and there wasn't going to be someone with the kids, and Edward's partner didn't want to give up her date.

> She was just going to go for a walk, so I said, "What do you think about taking the kids?" And she said, "yeah, it's time, right?" So yeah because whoever gets involved with us needs to know that we have little people who we are responsible for. It's our fault they came into existence, right? And they're our first priority…

He links this to their priority on the family structure: "[A]nd our family structure. We would like it to last the rest of our lives. We don't take it for granted that it's going to, but that's our goal... So, we want a stable environment for our kids, we have to work hard on our relationships." Even though Edward and his primary partner chose to introduce the children to their secondary partner, Edward makes it very clear that the family structure remains the top priority. It was important to them that they first worked hard on their domestic relationships to ensure they were creating a stable environment for their children. Jessica is part of Edward's dynamic and when she referred to him, she used the term primary, but clarified that "I would consider him primary but kind of just circumstantially

it has just worked out that way." She echoes Edward's perspective about working on their relationship at home to ensure that they are creating a positive environment for their children.

These values were also shared by Melody and her husband. Melody and her husband identify as egalitarian, but also talked about the need to prioritize their relationship for their daughter. They have decided that when one of them gets a more serious partner then they will have a discussion with their child about the fact that they are polyamorous. Since their child is an infant, and has some health issues, there are several strict boundaries in place for when they date other people. Melody explains how one of their key boundaries right now is rooted in respect and understanding: "there needs to be a respect and an understanding, a major one is that we tell people that our daughter has medical history... so she requires a lot of special ... circumstances in her care so one of our major things is that our family that we have right now comes first." Although Melody and her husband identify as egalitarian, their daughter and her needs shape the dynamic in a way that prioritizes the child and Melody and her husbands' relationship. Even though people who are polyamorous may hold egalitarian values, they deem it important to keep the environment at home as healthy as possible for their children. This means that those involved in the domestic relationship(s) will receive more attention than those who are not living in the same space. Ex-partners raising their children can impact hierarchy within a polyamorous dynamic as well.

Indeed, polyamorous relationship(s) can be impacted by ex-spouses when they have a shared responsibility of raising their child. Michael and his wife divorced after he wanted to be polyamorous and she felt that it was not for her. They still co-parent their

son and as a result, Michael asks his ex-spouse if she is okay if he introduces their son to his new partners. For example, Michael and his newer partner who he refers to as his VIP, reached the step where she met his son. He recalls the conversation when reflecting on who his son has met:

> So, we've introduced him to all of two people one's my current partner and one is this person who I call my VIP. This person has been in my life for about nine months and often times, you know if it's a weeknight that I'm out, I might Skype from their place and my son will have questions. I went to pick them up at the airport once and I had my son with me, and I double checked with my ex-spouse first to make sure that was okay. She was like "well yeah that's fine, he knows you spend a lot of time with that person, so it makes sense that he would see them at some point".

Michael's recollection demonstrates that as his relationship with his VIP became more serious, she was able to meet his son. His ex-spouse needed to agree to this first before he did this. He does not introduce his son to his partners unless they are serious, and he has received express permission from his ex-spouse. He carefully chooses who he introduces to his son and has only introduced two partners to him. Accordingly, his son and ex-spouse are external factors that impact his polyamorous dynamic.

Michael's preferred relationship trajectory is achieving an egalitarian polyamorous relationship within his household through co-parenting. He explains:

> I have dated individuals who have wanted to have children and that is something I am certainly on board with. It's kind of funny, my current partner never really thought that she would want to have children until

> she started building a relationship with my son. Now she would love for us to have more children in our expanded family although she's not going to be able to conceive herself, so she would absolutely be in for us to co-parent with the right people and I think honestly, all of the other romantic benefits aside, having a household with multiple parents able to tackle multiple kids at the same time and multiple incomes, I don't really see a downside to that.

Michael wants to be in an egalitarian relationship with multiple partners living in the same household in which they can expand over time. He clarifies that these relationships can be platonic or romantic, but he dreams of having a dynamic that is:

> More along the lines of communal families and communal partners with or without like additional partner's having children having a family… whatever other individual partners that we have that may want to live in that space that may not have like a romantic bond, but they have like a meta romantic or just a platonic bond with other partners who live in the household.

Michael strives to have domestic relationships that are centered around co-parenting and living in a communal household. Co-parenting and sharing finances are ways in which one achieves egalitarian poly for those immediately involved in the household. There is a shared responsibility of childrearing and having multiple incomes. At the same time, this can create hierarchy with outside partners should individuals decide to pursue relationships exterior to their domestic dynamic. Michael's dream is an example of how participants strive to create an egalitarian ideal by sharing household partners with the

common goal of childrearing and shared finances. Having children involved within the dynamics will create hierarchy for those outside of the domestic dynamic. However, if those external relationships get more serious, over time the relationship structure can become more egalitarian should partners choose to expand their communal families.

5.5 FROM HIERARCHY TO EGALITARIAN IDEALS

Hierarchy was a central theme in participants' accounts. This chapter demonstrated how there is a shift away from hierarchical relationship(s)within the subculture of polyamory. This was shown through the distancing from hierarchical language such as "primary" and "secondary". Participants shared an ideal of attaining an egalitarian polyamorous dynamic. Participants who had been practicing polyamory for several years were more active in their efforts ensure that all partners were loved and treated equally. In practice, however, participants' efforts to achieve equality were limited due to monogamous institutional structures and cultural values. Social institutions privilege the monogamous couple, meaning that partners who have shared financial obligations and shared benefits will have more power in the dynamic than partners who do not share these responsibilities. Additionally, the cultural ideal of monogamy and having a "one-and-only" is a deeply ingrained value held by North American society. As a result of monogamous values, participants used hierarchical language to make their primary partner feel more comfortable with expanding their definition of love. This shows that cultural monogamous values can shape polyamorous relationship(s) while all involved get more comfortable with the new arrangement. In contrast, some participants may not fully redefine their monogamous values, which leads to expectations of creating a polyamorous dynamic that is unobtainable in practice; specifically, finding an HBB. Finally, children and the desire for communal families introduces a tension as it both

fosters egalitarian relationships domestically and simultaneously creates hierarchy for those who are external to the household. Relationships that are dependent on co-parenting are prioritized to ensure a healthy and stable environment is created for the children. At the same time, participants fantasized about the desire to expand their families in order to live an ideal communal life. Ultimately, this demonstrates the cultural shift withing the polyamorous community to create egalitarian dynamics. Additionally, it shows that participants' ability to achieve an egalitarian dynamic is limited by both the institutional and cultural forces of monogamy, and familial priorities with childrearing.

CHAPTER 6: POLYAMORY AND STIGMA

The previous chapter demonstrated how hierarchies shape the ways in which polyamorous dynamics function. This chapter turns to stigma and how it informs the ways in which participants practice polyamory. Although I did not explicitly ask about stigma surrounding polyamory, this topic came up organically in several notable ways during the interviews. This chapter focuses on instances where this stigma impacted participants' everyday lives. Stigma profoundly shapes the values and practices of those who engage in polyamory, while also driving poly politics in Halifax. To illustrate these key findings, first I show how the risk associated with living a polyamorous life impacts participants' decision to come out as poly. Next, this chapter shows how participants express their values through discussions about media representations of polyamory. This section also addresses how participants challenge these portrayals and work to destigmatize and legitimize polyamory. Finally, this chapter explores how poly politics arose at the intersection of the kink community and other forms of CNMs as a result of the stigmatization of polyamory. These politics work to create a more inclusive community of stigmatized relationship practices but can simultaneously create tension by trivializing the very definition of polyamory. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates how stigma shapes the way in which participants practice polyamory, their values and the political tensions within the poly community.

6.1 "WHAT ARE YOU WILLING TO RISK?" HOW STIGMA SHAPES DECISIONS TO COME OUT AS POLYAMOROUS

Researchers have explored how people navigate conversations with their partner when interested in opening up their relationship (Barker, 2005; Finn, 2010; Wolkomir, 2015). However, there is little research published on people's experiences of coming out

as polyamorous to family members. There is a risk associated with living a life that deviates from monogamous norms, which impacts people's decision to come out (Sheff & Hammers, 2011). This section explores how stigma impacts participants' decisions about whether to come out to their friends and families and why some participants were willing to risk certain relationships but not others. It also demonstrates the everyday limitations that stigma places upon participants and their dynamics.

Liz is the only participant who is fully open to everyone that she knows. Before sharing her coming out story with me, she made sure to contextualize the amount of risk involved with living an open polyamorous life:

> What are you willing to risk? Are you willing to risk family? Friends? Are you willing to risk a landlord if you're renting? Somebody might not be unwilling to rent to you living in a poly household, are you willing to risk that? Are you willing to risk your job? What are you willing to risk? For me it comes down to I'm willing to risk everything I have.

Liz has been openly polyamorous for two decades and came out to her family as polyamorous because they asked her if she was having an affair. To clarify that she was not, she admitted to being in a CNM relationship. Her parents were not receptive to this:

> The response that I got was that I was an unfit mother, and that if my child was any younger, that they would see to it to remove him from my home. And it's because they don't have an understanding of what it is. And suddenly a consensual, loving and open relationship, was worse than a non-consensual, cheating partner.

Liz had decided to tell her parents the truth about being polyamorous, and her decision to come out to her parents changed their relationship. As she said, her parents even said that they would have tried to take her son away from her, had he been younger. Other academics have found that people who come out to their family as polyamorous risk losing that relationship with their family (Anapol, 2010; Sheff, 2011). Despite the stigma surrounding polyamory, Liz decided to come out to her family. She also felt obligated to do so as her parents were confronting her. She felt because it was consensual rather than non-consensual that they would be more understanding.

Other participants are more reluctant to tell their families about the fact they are polyamorous. This is because they feared that the stigma surrounding the practice would cost them their important relationships. Ruby, a leader in the polyamorous community, illustrates this experience. She organizes the brunches and poly coffees through the Halifax Polyamory Facebook group. She is not out to her parents because she does not want to cause them any stress:

> I'm very close with my family…but my father is sickly, and I don't know how he would take that information and if he doesn't need to know why would I risk him being all stressed out for no reason? And my mother is, oddly enough, she is aware of my kinky side of my life and she finds that fascinating, but when I have had conversations with her about polyamory... because we talk about a lot of things, she's like "well I don't think you could ever do that... I don't think you could ever do that cause you know the jealousy would kill you!"

As we saw with Liz, there is a risk in coming out to family members. Ruby is not willing to risk the close relationship that she has with her parents to live an openly polyamorous life. For her, the risk does not outweigh the possible consequences of losing the relationship. She is worried her choice to be polyamorous would cause her parents harm if they knew. Given her concerns, it is clear that stigma prevents her from coming out.

Ruby's reluctance to come out has caused some tension within her dynamic at family functions because her metamours[8] are unsure how to act. Ruby and her metamours are all friends. They are partners of the partner with whom Ruby currently lives. She brings her partner and her metamours to functions with her immediate biological family but says there can be tension because she is not out to these family members. She explains:

> For holidays and events and stuff like that, I will invite my friends who also are my metamours to family events. My two metamours right now have both been to my house multiple times, have met my family, and my brother. With the awareness that I'm not out and with my romantic partner there. So, but I dunno I guess I'm not out, but I'm not lying either.... I'm saying to [my brother] that and my friends are coming...it's not a lie, it's just not the complete truth and I'm not very overly romantic with my partner in front of my parents anyway so we're not really changing the structure of our behavior that much. But my [metamours] have mentioned it's hard for them to know how to act, but I do appreciate that they respect my wishes.

[8] Metamours is a term used to refer to a partner's partner(s)

Ruby's reluctance to come out to her family impacts how her poly dynamic functions in spaces where her family is present. Although her metamours respect her wishes, she understands that it is hard for them. It is evident she struggles with lying by omission, however, the benefits of keeping her close relationship with her parents outweigh the cost of this discomfort. Liz and Ruby's stories demonstrate the ways in which important familial relationships are at risk due to the stigma that surrounds polyamory.

Although Ruby and other participants were not out to their families, they were out to other people who they were not as close to because there was less risk of losing them, or less at stake if they did lose them. Loraine has made a similar decision as Ruby. She is not out to her parents, but she is willing to come out to people with whom she has less of a relationship to risk. For example, she decided to tell a classmate when she found out that they were going to the same event as her and her partners. She said:

> I was just super honest and straight to the point like "I just want to let you know, I'm with two people, it's consensual and very healthy and happy, we all get along and I just don't want you to be shocked when you see me at the event with two people... one on each arm or whatever" and their response was so great it was "Oh you're polyamorous too!" It was so great! It was so not what I was expecting, and I was so happy. Because I'm sitting in a class with a lot of young people and a lot of people who are in monogamous relationships so it's a little... like overwhelming thinking like, "oh I'm probably the only person".

By disclosing that she was polyamorous to her classmate to lessen a possibly awkward situation, Loraine discovered that she was not as isolated as she thought from some of her

classmates. This is an example of how participants choose whether to disclose to their peers that they are polyamorous. Participants carefully consider what they are willing to risk by coming out and how that could impact them based on the stigma that surrounds polyamory.

Stormy is someone who wants to be fully open and polyamorous, but because of her line of work, she is still careful who she speaks to about her practice. Similar to Liz, Stormy is one of the most openly polyamorous participants in the study. However, Stormy wants to have a career in social work and due to the stigma associated with polyamory, she does not want to risk her career goals. Stormy explained this near the end of the interview when I reassured her that I was using pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. She explained:

> I want to get into social work and work with vulnerable youth.... the polyamory piece can potentially get me into trouble. Which is really frustrating so I can't wait for legislation, laws and people's mindsets to change, but the world is what it is and because at the same time I want to live my life as openly and honestly as possible I do appreciate the fact that this [interview] is all confidential.

For Stormy, the stigma surrounding polyamory shapes her decisions to be fully open about being polyamorous because it jeopardizes her future career. She dreams that one day general views will shift and instigate systemic changes to incorporate polyamorous practices. For now, she chooses to not risk her career and remain anonymous when she discusses her lifestyle. This shows that stigma still impacts some of the most open members of the polyamorous community.

This section demonstrated that stigma shapes participants' decisions about coming out and who to come out to. It also impacts how participants feel they can conduct themselves in certain public spaces, which influences how their dynamics function in everyday life. Ultimately, stigma limits participants from living a fully open polyamorous life, and this can shape how their dynamics function in certain circumstances.

6.2 DEFINING STIGMA THROUGH MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND COMING OUT STORIES

One of the key topics in which stigma emerged as a theme was discussion of media representations of polyamory. These discussions were used to show what participants felt polyamory was and was not. In other words, they help to describe what participants valued about polyamory and how they defined it. This section examines how participants felt the media misinterprets polyamory in ways that contribute to the stigmatization of the practice. It then examines how the participants want the practice to be perceived in order to legitimize it. Ultimately, this section shows how participants' values are shaped by the stigma surrounding polyamory. Participants felt that the media creates stigma in three ways: 1) Conflating the term polyamory with polygamy; 2) Placing emphasis on sex rather than love; 3) Portraying polyamory as synonymous with other forms of CNMs. To legitimize polyamory, participants wanted to see multiple narratives of polyamory being shared, and for those narratives to emphasize love instead of sex.

Participants felt that polyamory was stigmatized because people often interpreted it to be polygamy. Ruby shares her concerns with this misinterpretation: "Like the *Sister Wives* thing where the rules are very strict and it's more misogyny, it's way too male-centered. I think that they're using the term polyamory when it doesn't really apply".

Ruby is concerned about the association between polygamy and polyamory because the freedoms associated with polyamory are not shared with polygamy. Polygamy is a kinship pattern that may be rooted in or justified with reference to a religious practice and can be seen as oppressive to women. Shows like *Sister Wives*, which portrays a family that practices polygamy justified by their religious belief, attempt to show how women can be empowered by this way of living and often leave critique out of the narrative (Luckett, 2013). For Ruby, the freedom of choice that polyamory gives her is an important contradiction with polygamous values. Furthermore, because polygamy is illegal, it can be interpreted as being cult-like by the public. Stormy shows this when she discusses her mother's reaction when she came out to her as polyamorous:

> [My mom] was like "WHAHHH wait a second" …she was really concerned and actually asked me if I was involved in a cult… And a lot of that is because of shows like *Sister Wives* was on TV and that's all my mom could think about and, marrying child brides and had a whole bunch of them. So, all she was able to see you know was the perversion that the media represented. It was really hard, and we went through a couple of years of frustration.

Stormy's mother thought that her daughter was either part of a cult or part of a polygamous relationship because of the media representation of non-monogamous relationships which she interpreted as polyamorous.

Another way participants felt that polyamory was misrepresented was the emphasis on sex rather than love. Liz too referenced *Sister Wives*, sharing her concern that the media represents polyamory as "all about sex and [that] you're selfish and just

want it all and is a gateway to orgies, which is ridiculous. But that's the idea, that's how it's been framed. And if it is not that, it's polygamy." These concerns are echoed by Baltic, who talks about how audiences interpret media representations: "I think a lot of people think polyamory is swinging and that it's just the same thing, that it's just like going to parties and swapping and having orgies and that's never been my experience ... it's not what I've seen from people, you know?" Both Liz and Baltic are concerned about the media's focus being centered around sex rather than long-lasting, intimate attachments.

Like Baltic, other participants also feel frustrated by the way polyamory is confused with other forms of CNMs, particularly those that emphasize emotional but not sexual exclusivity. May expresses her concerns about this:

> I think a big [misconception] is just the confusion in mainstream media between polygamy and polyamory and swinging and all these different things. There's no separation and it's just... people think it's all the same thing… so there's a lot of confusion that way.

Without the separation between polyamory and other forms of CNMs such as swinging, open relationships and polygamy by the mainstream media, participants felt that polyamory was being misrepresented and thus, stigmatized by the general public. This concern has been cited in other studies on polyamory (Kleese, 2006; Sheff, 2015). As an alternative, participants expressed their desire to see these narratives focus on love and diversity.

Throughout the interviews, I asked participants how they would like to see polyamory be represented. Most participants painted a very similar picture which

highlighted their values. They wanted to see a polyamory in the media focused on love, and a polyamory that closely mirrored the way that they were practicing it. As discussed in the literature review, portrayals of polyamory mostly focus on a married couple who open up their relationship and date another person, often together (Ritchie, 2010). This was reiterated by Liz who pointed out that "what we see is this very narrow prescript and it isn't any different, how it's set up, mostly a lot of configurations are set up so that they most closely resemble monogamy. So, they are the least of the threatening to heteronormative values and a mainstream audience." Participants wanted to see more diverse narratives of polyamory and shift attention away from sex and focus on love instead.

Stormy talked about how she would like to see varied representations such as asexual folks who are poly. In fact, she explained that polyamory is a great practice for folks who are asexual: "There are a lot of asexual folks you know because polyamory doesn't focus on the sex piece...you can be a lot more flexible in what your relationship styles look like". Stormy gave an example of a group of people who do not desire to have sex at all emphasize love. The emphasis on love is also demonstrated by Melody's desire to see more polyamorous relationships like hers represented. She explains that "it would be nice to see something that accurately represents what we do.... the loving dynamic of a polyamory relationship, the relationship aspect and not just the sexual relationships that occur within a poly relationship." Melody wants to see narratives that go beyond sex, likely to distance herself from other forms of non-monogamy and to reduce the stigma attributed to polyamorous relationships.

Indeed, some participants chose to compare their practice to monogamy instead of other CNMs to emphasize their focus on love. Loraine sees polyamory as similar to monogamy because the goal is to foster love and commitment to individuals, rather than emphasizing the sexual component. She explains:

> I'd just say that it's not that different from monogamy other than you have more than one partner. I don't understand how that's so hard for people to wrap their head around… Our capacity to love and have feelings and desire to commit to people doesn't have any effect on the individual relationships [that we already have]. [For me,] they don't affect each other that way. They're independent.

Loraine emphasizes the idea of love rather than sex and relates it more closely to monogamy than other forms of CNMs. When considering stigma, this choice of comparison is particularly interesting, as monogamy is normalized in society while polyamory is not.

Other participants want to see various representations of polyamory that depart from the single representation currently in the media. For example, May wants to see more diverse representations of polyamory. May explains that her desire is to have mainstream media talk about various stories and to encourage others to create their own individual polyamory:

> I think that it's a matter of showing more stories so that people can see the diversity in all of them because people's situations can be so different and it can change so much that the more we keep telling stories, the same is...there's so many different monogamous stories out there it's gunna

> show that everybody can do it their own way. One's not better or worse, it's just different.

May wants to see stories of polyamory that represent the various ways one can practice it, comparing this to the way monogamy is diversely represented in media. It is interesting that both Loraine and May draw on monogamy rather than other forms of non-monogamy to emphasize love rather than sex. Their narratives show how they distance themselves from polyamory's stigma by emphasizing love as a central value of their practice.

Liz also wants to see polyamorous stories that celebrate more diversity:

> I think polyamory is as diverse as the number of people who are practicing it… I would like to see more stories coming from POC [people of colour] and from a different worldview than the typical dominant narrative that we're seeing all the time, and to show the diversity of what polyamory is to people, and the different ways people come into it because we all come to this for different reasons and in different ways… And all of them are valid.

Liz echoes similar desires as other researchers on the topic of polyamory and the lack of diverse representation of how polyamory can be practiced (Noël, 2006; Sheff & Hammers, 2011; Sheff, 2015). May, Liz and Melody all want to see narratives that explore different ways to be polyamorous. All participants mentioned that they also want to shift the focus from sex to love. This speaks to common values centred on love rather than on sex and how participants want to see varied ways that polyamory can be practiced. These common values show that there is a desire by participants to destigmatize and legitimize the practice of polyamory.

This push for legitimacy and destigmatization is also evident in participants' efforts to distinguish polyamory from other forms of CNMs. This is consistent with previous studies on polyamory (Kean, 2018; Kleese, 2006). In Christian Kleese's 2006 study, one of his participants emphasized the importance that the polyamorous community places on love. The participant explained this by shedding light on how the very term polyamory was created using both Greek and Latin words in order to reduce possible stigma around the practice:

> [Polyamory] comes from the Greek word 'poly' meaning many and then the Latin word, the Latin bit is 'amory'. I guess [the creators of the term] went for the mixture of Greek and Latin, because the all Greek version would be polyphilia, and philias are usually things like necrophilia and paedophilia, things that are associated by the public with being bad (Kleese, 2006, p.567).

This linguistic choice shows the lengths that those who created the term polyamory went to in order to create a legitimate relationship practice. Kleese also found that participants tried to distance themselves from other forms of CNMs because many of those practices do not focus on long-lasting emotional attachments (Kleese, 2006). This supports why some participants feel strongly about the representation of polyamory and want to shift the narrative to a focus on love rather than sex.

This section highlighted the ways in which participants feel that polyamory is stigmatized. Additionally, it touched on the participants' desires to legitimize the practice through more diverse narratives with an emphasis on love rather than sex. It also demonstrated the shared goal to clearly distinguish polyamory from other forms of

CNMs. In practice, however, these ideals are challenged by the ways in which leaders in the polyamorous community try to create a more inclusive space for other stigmatized practices.

6.3 THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN POLYAMORY AND KINK: HOW STIGMA SHAPES POLY POLITICS

This section demonstrates how stigma drives the politics within the polyamorous community in two ways. First is the desire to change the narrative from sex to love, which speaks to the values that participants find most important, as discussed in the previous section. The second is to create community that is inclusive of all CNMs that experience the same stigma, which contributes to negotiations amongst members of the group about what it means to be polyamorous. These two ideals conflict with one another and create tension between polyamorous folks trying to differentiate themselves from other forms of CNMs, and those who have begun to view themselves as polyamorous because of these communities intersecting. This section will show how Halifax leaders are trying to be inclusive to people who practice other CNMs in order to create a safe space to be who they are. I will specifically be discussing the Halifax Polyamory Facebook group. Finally, this section shows how these two ideals, both shaped by the stigma surrounding the practice, converge with one another in ways that create tension within the polyamorous community. As a result of these tensions, the very definition of polyamory begins to be broadened and remains under negotiation by those who practice it. These tensions are especially pronounced in the small city of Halifax.

Due to its small population of 440,332 people (Storring, 2020), Halifax has limited resources for polyamorous folks and folks who practice other forms of CNMs.

There is an intersection between the polyamory and the kink community in general, but it is especially present in Halifax because the leaders of the polyamory group are also leaders in kink[9] communities. Not all people who are polyamorous are kinky and not all kinky people are poly or non-monogamous, but there is a pronounced intersection between the two groups (Kean, 2018). With the desire to be as inclusive as possible, the Halifax Polyamory Facebook group, updated their description to include those in other consensually non-monogamous relationships. It reads as follows:

> This is a Polyamory Social group for people in Nova Scotia. This group is a space for support and discussion of polyamory and other forms of consensual non-monogamy. Whether you are polyamorous or curious, you are welcome. Social gatherings will be held monthly if the interest is there!

The social gatherings consist of bi-weekly brunches and bi-weekly coffees which are also advertised on Fetlife, a website designated for people in BDSM, fetish, and kink communities. Therefore, these gatherings attract a variety of people who may not identify as polyamorous but might be consensually non-monogamous.

The name of the Facebook group can give the impression that it is specifically for polyamorous people. A couple of participants cited their discomfort with the intersection between the two communities as their definition of polyamory becomes trivialized and their values challenged. At the time of interview, Edward had just joined the Halifax Polyamory Facebook group in an effort to find like-minded individuals who also

[9] By kink I mean folks who participate in sexual practices, such as Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism (BDSM) that fall outside of the general norm.

identified as polyamorous. He was frustrated when he saw a couple in the group who he felt were not polyamorous. He says:

> I'm a little annoyed that I saw a couple in there who are members, and I know them socially, and all they want is unicorns which is a woman who wants to have a threesome with a guy and a girl. And they aren't poly at all. Like they are safe people, they are good people, but they're not looking for an emotional connection or a relationship or whatever. They are looking for specifically a woman to have a sexual encounter with and that's great. Like no beef with that, but I just don't understand why they would be in a polyamory community discussion forum when I know for a fact that outside of that perimeter, sexual encounters with a woman.... for both of them. That they're not too interested, so it's like, Why are you guys here?

Edward reiterates that he liked the couple, but he is confused why they would be part of that Facebook group called Halifax Polyamory, which hints at his values and how he defines his practice. Edward's dynamic is focused on love rather than sex, and although he and his partners play,[10] it is meaningful to him to differentiate between the two. This shows that he wants there to be a differentiation between polyamory and other forms of CNMs. He mentioned that the couple was only interested in sex, which is a point of contention for him. Michael has similar reservations but is more concerned with the events than the Facebook group. He feels that Halifax is a little different when it comes to polyamory. He explains:

[10] A common term used to describe sexual practices in the kink community.

> The community here in Halifax particularly is very closely intertwined with the kink community. And because of that, polyamory is viewed more as a fetish than it is like a relationship practice or dynamic. So, what I see more is [people saying] “Hey you know my partner and I are both non-monogamous” and not “I'm a non-monogamous person and I'm open to developing other relationships with other people.” It's more along the lines of "Hey these two people are dating and I'd really like it if that person could be my rope buddy so I’m just going to say I'm poly and that way I can like have sexualized play with them, and still maintain our relationship." And everybody agrees because you just throw out the p word. Or it's like, “oh you know I'm poly, that's why I'm casually dating five or six different women.” No, you're not poly, you're just casually dating five or six women. So, I feel like as it became a term that people started seeing in television or in media or in film, or wherever they were hearing it, they were kind of grasping at it as a way to justify what they were doing.

Like Edward, Michael does not feel that some people who identify as polyamorous in Halifax actually fit the definition of the practice. Some people might still identify as polyamorous, but they may place an emphasis on sex instead of love, which threatens the ideal of polyamory participants described in the previous section. In efforts to legitimize the practice by placing an emphasis on love, participants such as Edward and Michael feel that some people were applying it to their lives who do not truly share the same values.

Due to the stigma that surrounds the practice and the way that it is being interpreted by the poly community in Halifax, Michael has decided to stop using the term "polyamorous" and instead chose to use another less common term "ethically non-monogamous". This creates an opportunity for him to explain to people what he means by that. I asked him if he would consider readopting the term polyamory to which he replied:

> I would ideally if I was in a bigger community or a bigger urban center where the communities were much more separated. And it's not to say that I'm sure people who are in one community that don't participate in another for a variety of reasons, but in Halifax specifically, it's more that the one community is kind of the driving force behind the other and because of that, I don't know, maybe you have seen that for yourself.

Michael feels that "polyamory" not being used in a way that fits his interpretation of the term which focuses on love and ethics and has chosen to say he is ethically non-monogamous instead. He feels that it is an issue in Halifax because there are two very different communities that have merged into one.

Concerns like Michael's are not new. Other studies have found that some people have become more protective about the term polyamory and have placed an emphasis on love rather than on sex (Kleese, 2006; Séguin, 2019). Some people might adopt the term polyamory because it has been shown that it holds less stigma than other forms of CNMs (Séguin, 2019). There is no clear definition of polyamory posted in the Facebook group, meaning newcomers may not have a definition to work from. Nevertheless, participants expressed their desire to see a specific representation of polyamory in order to

destigmatize and legitimize the practice. They want there to be an emphasis placed on love rather than sex, and they to see various narratives of polyamory. At the same time, because polyamory is stigmatized, leaders within this community want all to feel welcome and to promote inclusivity of other groups who understand and experience similar stigma. Due to these converging ideals driven by the stigma that shapes the practice, what defines the term polyamory and its values becomes contested amongst community members and continues to be negotiated.

6.4 INCLUSIVITY OR LEGITIMACY: THE DOUBLE EDGED SWORD OF POLY POLITICS

This chapter demonstrated the ways in which the everyday practice of polyamory and its values are profoundly shaped by the stigma surrounding it. Participants referenced stigma in various areas of their interviews. They discussed the ways in which stigma shaped their decisions to come out (or not) as polyamorous to various people in their lives. They demonstrated the values that they held through their frustrations with media representations and through their desires to see polyamorous narratives centered on love. These values of love were central to participants and to their desire to legitimize polyamory as a practice. At the same time, participants understood what it was like to face stigma, leading some of them to create a community that was inclusive of other forms of CNMs. These two conflicting ideals create tensions within the local poly community between those who value love above all else, and those who value inclusivity of other stigmatized practices. This demonstrates that stigma drives poly politics, creating a double-edged sword for those who practice polyamory. On the one hand, inclusive definitions of polyamory foster a broader community safe space of people to support one another. On the other hand, conflating polyamory with other CNMs can further

marginalize those who seek to maintain their polyamorous ideal where love is the focus, jeopardizing the participants' attempt to legitimize the practice.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Understandings and practices of love, family structures, and sexual norms and values in the West are undergoing major changes (Coontz, 2005; Illouz, 2012; Weeks, 1995). The findings of this study suggest that polyamory is one result of some of these shifting values. More broadly, these findings illustrate how polyamorous folks give meaning to their practice through the creation of shared norms and values which have resulted in a subculture. The previous chapters identified how people who are polyamorous create their relationships, how those relationships function in practice, and how stigma shapes polyamorous communities and participants' everyday lives. This conclusion more firmly situates these findings within the sociological literature on contemporary love and intimacy, the anthropology of kinship and the sociology of sexual deviance, demonstrating the ways in which polyamory is the result of greater social and cultural changes taking place at this historical juncture. Specifically, this chapter highlights how Canadian culture commends the pursuit of individual self-fulfillment and is expanding its idea of what 'counts' as a family. These changes are made possible by current uncertainty with sexual values in the West. Throughout this analysis, I suggest directions for future research on polyamory.

7.1 ACHIEVING INDIVIDUAL SELF-FULFILLMENT THROUGH A NEW CULTURE OF CHOICE

In Chapter 4, I demonstrated how participants come to the realization that monogamy is not for them, and consciously choose to pursue a relationship structure better aligned with their values. They often did not originally know what this relationship structure would be and only arrived at polyamory after deep personal self-reflection. Significantly, participants in this study wanted to ensure that they met both their own

needs and the needs of their partner(s). They attempted to do this through what many called a "trial-by-fire" approach in which they negotiated both boundaries and relationship flexibility with their partners. Relationship flexibility paired with broad boundaries enabled participants to address their changing needs without necessarily ending their relationships. It allowed participants to experience long-lasting attachments while continuing to pursue new ones.

This phenomenon of relationship fluidity might be seen as the result of the cultural values of individualization and the culture of choice, which have been impacting monogamous relationships for many years now due to individualism emerging from contemporary social and economic changes in North American society (Illouz, 2012). The culture of choice is often seen as the cause of higher divorce rates or as a problem that makes it difficult for people to commit to a single relationship (Bauman, 2003; Illouz, 2012). Scholars have left CNMs, polyamory in particular, out of their analyses of these changing values, however. My research suggests that polyamory can be seen as a relationship practice that directly challenges issues of commitment that arise in some of this research (Bauman, 2003). These findings expand contemporary sociology of love and intimacy, suggesting that the culture of choice does not necessarily always erode commitment. People seem to enter into polyamorous relationships precisely because they wish to foster commitment, while also honouring their own individual desires and needs.

Their ability to do this required some skill and effort to navigate, however. The findings of this study also show that approaching polyamory requires unlearning monogamous values, an ongoing process that was more complex for participants newer to it. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, participants who were newer to polyamory had to

reconcile the cultural value of singular monogamous, romantic love with the new subcultural value of loving many. They were also trying to learn how to satisfy their own needs and those of their partner(s). These tensions were evident when participants outlined strict boundaries for their relationship(s) or struggled communicating what their boundaries were. These tensions were also evident when participants attempted in interviews to rationalize their choice to pursue polyamorous relationship(s) with their partner(s). Even participants who had been polyamorous for many years indicated that unlearning monogamous values is an ongoing process. Some participants reached a point where they could comfortably embrace relationship flexibility and broad boundaries, while others decided that polyamory was not going to meet their needs and reverted to monogamy as we saw with John. These findings suggest that pursuing individual self-fulfillment within committed relationship(s) is complex and takes time.

Polyamory can be seen as a response to changing cultural norms and values surrounding practices of love and intimacy in the West. Polyamorous folks place the new cultural value of individual self-fulfillment to create fluid and flexible relationship(s). When a relationship no longer meets their needs or the needs of their partner(s), they attempt to alter the function of that relationship so that relationship does not need to end and they can continue to commit to other people simultaneously. Cultural values of monogamy creep into this process, and it takes participants years to disentangle themselves from traditional norms and values in a way where everyone involved is comfortable. I argue that this relationship practice emerges from a culture of choice but does not signal a turn away from long-term commitments. However, monogamous

institutions and values are still the norm, which impacts the ways in which polyamorous relationship(s) are created and how they function.

In future research, scholars could look at polyamory and other CNMs and analyze their relation to changing cultural norms of love and intimacy more closely, particularly when it comes to modern dating practices, romantic love and if/how people are pursuing these newer practices. Sociologists of love and intimacy could also explore the process of unlearning monogamy in more depth. It would be interesting to learn more about the tension between unlearning monogamy and learning polyamory and how it impacts the way that individuals seek partner(s).

7.2 THE LIMITATIONS OF AN EGALITARIAN IDEAL: SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON 'FAMILY' STRUCTURE

'Family' values continue to change while the institution of marriage remains fairly traditional and monogamy-focused (Nock, 1999). Scholars engaged in the anthropology of kinship have found that some people create workarounds within the institution of marriage and are creating families that are intentional and flexible. Few studies have explored these kinds of relationships as kin relationships, however among the few are (Bettinger, 2005; Hidalgo, Barber, & Hunter, 2008; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Chapter 5 discussed how polyamorous folks create their unions as hierarchical or egalitarian, and how those unions functioned day-to-day in a predominantly monogamous society. This subsection will suggest why anthropologists of kinship might want to look at how these units are structured more closely.

In the West, families and marriage are no longer created primarily to expand kinship ties or for economic arrangements (Coontz, 2005). Reasons why people get married and form unions have changed, with people choosing marriage for love and self-

fulfillment. Despite this shift, monogamous institutions and values centred on a one-and-only have remained (Nock, 1999; Wolkomir, 2015). People in polyamorous relationships encounter challenges from internalized monogamous values as well as institutional norms that force polyamorous folks to choose between partners. Consequently, monogamous values and institutions still shape how polyamorous unions function within broader society.

This study found that some poly folks arranged their unions strategically to mirror monogamy more closely. The "mirroring" strategy enabled folks to accommodate the least comfortable partner while also creating the opportunity for the more comfortable partner to create other romantic attachments. Alternatively, those who had been polyamorous for several years aimed for greater egalitarianism. This was seen through Liz, Ruby and Stormy who have all been polyamorous for several years. Egalitarian polyamory rejects monogamy completely, but was difficult to realize, however, due to the barriers imposed by monogamy as the valued marital institution which is reflected in things like workplace benefits policies. These barriers foster an inherent hierarchy. In contrast, some participants operated within monogamous values as a strategy to help their primary partner become more comfortable. Loraine, Bart and Jenna were still adhering to monogamous scripts by prioritizing their spouse over secondaries. The overall family unit also played a role in how polyamorous unions could function.

Hierarchies were also imposed when children were involved. Participants like Michael and Edward had children who they were raising. Edward, in particular, prioritized his domestic relationships to ensure the environment remained positive for the children. Michael expressed the desire to one day live in a multi-partner home to raise

children together and talked about how his son and ex-wife take priority over his relationships. These are factors that will create a hierarchy with the children at the top meaning that domestic relationship(s) and relationships with the other biological parent will often come first.

Polyamorous folks build on the ideal of creating intentional families often with the aim of creating larger units based both on love and increased opportunities to pool resources which, in turn, can help those involved pursue individual self-fulfillment, as we saw with Michael. Others wanted to create an intentional family with shared ideals, but not necessarily domestic, as we saw with Stormy. It was not within the scope of this project to further analyze these two ideals, but questions about polyamory and communal families should be further explored by anthropologists of kinship. Although there is a well-established anthropological literature on changing values and structures of the family, polyamory has been left relatively untouched by anthropologists.

Polyamory is rife with hierarchies both intentional and unintentional as they are often governed by monogamous values and institutions to some degree. My thesis has looked at how polyamorous unions function in terms of hierarchy, and how these relationship(s) are faced with barriers from the monogamous institutions that are integrated in Western society. However, there is much more research that needs to be done in the anthropology of kinship. For example, how do relationship(s) with metamours function within the same household? Why do these particular households emerge? What happens when they do not work out? Researchers should work to apply a kinship lens to these families and households to further uncover how they are structured and how they

function. This may be easier to do in a few years, if polyamory continues to become more mainstream.

7.3 EMERGENCE OF POLY POLITICS: A PATHWAY TO LEGITIMACY

Once on the fringes of society, polyamory is gradually finding its way to the mainstream. At the same time, polyamory is still stigmatized. It is often misunderstood by the general public as polygamy or other forms of CNMs, which the participants in this study considered problematic. Chapter 6 demonstrated how participants engaged in diverse relationship structures, and sought to shift the narrative of polyamory to one that would capture this diversity, and at the same, tried to define polyamory in a way that differentiated it from other forms of CNMs. This seemed to create tension and contradictions for the participants of this study and the community to which they belonged. This section builds on these findings to argue for more research to be conducted about the poly politics that are emerging as a result of increasing public interest in the practice. In order to demonstrate this, I contextualize polyamory as being a result of a time when the West is living within an 'age of [sexual] uncertainty' (Weeks, 1995).

This study reinforces the idea proposed in Chapter 2, that in many ways, polyamory is a subculture. Folks who practice polyamory adhere to their own subcultural norms and values, many have experienced stigma, and some have even taken polyamory on as an identity. They also work to support one another as a community by throwing events in safe spaces (both in person and on social media). Although polyamory is becoming a point of public discussion, study participants were not all "out" to their families. As values and norms surrounding sexualities are so "uncertain" within society, there is room for more discussion of this emerging practice within the public sphere.

As sexual practices are more closely examined and debated, polyamory appears to be more palatable for the general public. It involves ideals of romantic love, meaning that it does not deviate completely from monogamous values. As a result of the growing curiosity from the public, people within the polyamorous communities appear to be negotiating norms and values once again as the practice approaches the mainstream. These negotiations are often driven by those who hold the most privilege within the group (Becker, 1963).

Chapter 6 demonstrated that a side effect to legitimization has been the creation of a poly politics. Participants want to dispel misconceptions of the practice, such as being confused with other forms of CNMs, while at the same time they want to hear more stories of other non-monogamous arrangements, which could directly contradict this desire to dispel myths of the practice. This desire to dispel myths gets challenged through shared experience of stigma. Poly folks still experience stigma, meaning that they understand the experiences of those in other forms of CNMs and want to create a more inclusive community. As we are starting to see these contradictions emerge while polyamory becomes more widely discussed, scholars should conduct more research on how these tensions play out on public forums and look at who the leaders of change are within poly communities. For example, Halifax is a small city where intersections between polyamory and kink are quite pronounced. As discussed in Chapter 6, the ways these communities overlap has created some tension in the Halifax poly community.

7.4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research had several limitations, the first being its scope. I recruited participants predominantly from the Halifax Polyamory Facebook page, which contains members who identified as polyamorous, but many of whom are also very active in the

kink communities. This may have led to an overemphasis on the intersection between polyamory and other forms of CNMs. However, other scholars have also noted this intersection (Anapol, 2010; Noël, 2006; Pitagora, 2016). Halifax is a small city with multiple universities, which creates a relatively liberal culture. This means that polyamory may not be as socially accepted in other places as it is in Halifax. Additionally, like most studies that use semi-structured interviews as a method, these are narrative accounts. The ideals that polyamorous folks have recounted in their interviews may very well look different in practice which could be an area of future research. Finally, polyamory is something that has garnered increasing interest from academics meaning that since I started this project in 2017, there has been a surge in publications on the topic. Although I worked to keep up to date with the literature, I was not able to read everything. This means that there could have been more developments within sociology and social anthropological literatures that are not accounted for here.

I hope that this study will be useful for people looking at how polyamorous folks create norms and values in order to give meaning to their relationships. Specifically, I hope that it helps to illustrate how polyamorous relationship dynamics function within the confines of a monogamous society. I hope that it shows the ongoing negotiations of the meaning of polyamory as the practice works its way to the mainstream especially in terms of how these values are further negotiated, redefined and legitimized. The results of this study suggest that participants navigate between individual self-fulfillment and commitment in their relationship(s), that these relationship(s) are structured according to poly norms and ethics, and that they face particular challenges as they function in a

predominantly monogamous society. The results also suggest that a new poly politics is emerging as the practice makes its way to the mainstream.

Polyamory is a complex relationship practice that has emerged from the culture of individualization and the value of choice. It is important that scholars of contemporary sociology of love and intimacy analyze this growing practice and situate it in changing norms and values of love, desire and, how these relationship(s) are created outside of the monogamous couple opening up. In addition to this, polyamory can be seen as creating a new structure of the 'family', building on values of the intentional family while also deviating from the nuclear family, with the aspiration of creating larger social resources to help with economic resources and child rearing. It is important for anthropologists to examine polyamory further through the lens of kinship; the present study only really scratched this surface. Moreover, polyamory is at a point of transition towards greater legitimization, which has provoked more politics within the subculture polyamorous people attempt to negotiate values in a way that will bring their practice acceptance. This is an ongoing debate that should provoke further research within the sociology of sexual deviance. Researchers can look at how these negotiations take place, how leaders may be part of practices that intersect with polyamory and what kinds of norms and values are persisting within the practice of polyamory. Finally, scholars should examine what is being sacrificed in the name of legitimization. They could explore comparisons between polyamory and the history of the Gay Rights movement and there appears to be similarities between the tensions that arise when a subculture starts to become normalized.

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APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM

CONSENT FORM

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY
Inspiring Minds

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

Poly Plotlines: Narratives of Nonmonogamy in Nova Scotia

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by me, Brooke Edwards, a master's student in Social Anthropology, as part of my Master of Arts degree at Dalhousie University. The purpose of this research is to interview polyamorous people to understand how they make sense of and give meaning to their relationship practices. I will write up the results of this research in a paper, called the master's thesis.

As a participant in the research, you will be asked to answer a number of interview questions about your biographical story as someone who identifies as polyamorous. You will also be asked about the ways you negotiate boundaries in your relationship(s). The interview should take about an hour and will be conducted in a quiet location of your choice. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. If I quote any part of it in my Master's thesis, I will use a pseudonym, not your real name, and I will remove any other details that could identify you or your friends from the quote.

Information that you provide to me will be kept private and will be anonymized, which means any identifying details such as your name or your friends'/partners' names will be removed from it. Only my Master's supervisor and I will have access to the unprocessed information you offer. I will describe and share general findings to the Sociology and Social Anthropology Department at Dalhousie in my Masters' thesis. Furthermore, some of my findings may be published in a Sociological Journal or a Journal in Social Anthropology. Nothing that could identify you will be included in the thesis, or any published work that I may use my findings for. I will keep the anonymized information so that I can learn more from it as I continue with my studies.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to answer questions that you do not want to answer, and you are welcome to stop the interview at any time if you no longer want to participate. If you decide to stop participating after the interview is over, you can do so until December 31st, 2018. I will not be able to remove the information you provided after that date, because I will have completed my analysis, but the information will not be used in any other research.

The risks associated with this study are no greater than those you would encounter if you talked about this topic in your everyday life. There will be no

direct benefit to you in participating in this research and you will not receive compensation. The research, however, will contribute to new knowledge on polyamory and expand the research in a variety of sociological and anthropological fields, furthermore, it aims to destigmatize the practice. If you would like to see how your information is used, please feel free to contact me and I will send you a copy of my Master's thesis after May 1st.

If you have questions or concerns about the research please feel free to contact me or my MA supervisor. My contact information is 705.783.4300 or brooke.edwards@dal.ca. You can contact my supervisor, Dr. Fiona Martin, at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Dalhousie University by email fiona.martin@dal.ca

If you have any ethical concerns about your participation *i*n this research, you may contact Catherine Connors, Director, Research Ethics, Dalhousie University at (902) 494-1462, or email ethics@dal.ca.

Participant's consent:

☐ I have read the above information and I agree to participate in this study.

☐ I consent to the audio recording of my interview.

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date: _____

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology • Dalhousie University • 6135 University Ave • PO Box 15000 • Halifax NS B3H 4R2 • Canada

Tel: 902.494-6593 • Fax: 902.494-2897 • www.dal.ca

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide: Poly Plotlines: Narratives in Nonmonogamy

Section 1: General Questions about Nonmonogamy

1) When did you first realize that you wanted to practice non-monogamy?
2) Have you ever been monogamous? If so, were you in an originally monogamous union where you mutually decided to explore nonmonogamy? How did you go about making this transition?
3) Is non-monogamy something that you tried not to practice when you first initially realized that you wanted to pursue nonmonogamy?
4) Did you practice other forms of nonmonogamy before polyamory?
5) In your words, how would you define polyamory?
6) Are there any boundaries or rules that you ensure to disclose or set with all of your partners?
7) Are there any 'deal breakers' for you that you communicate (or not) to your partners?

Section 2: Polyamory in Practice

1) Do you have a particular story of 'coming out' as polyamorous to your friends and family? If so, would you mind sharing it?
2) Have you ever had an anchor partner? If so, did you enter into this union knowing that it would be polyamorous?
3) Have your partners ever met one another? If so, have there ever been any conflicts between them?
4) If you are a solo poly, what are some of the reasons behind why you practice this particular form of polyamory?
5) Do you have children? If so, do you raise them in an openly polyamorous home? If you do, how do you explain or talk about your practices to them?

Section 3: Polyamory as represented by the Public/ The Future of Monogamy

1) Are there common misconceptions of polyamory being represented in the media? For example, on television or in books.
2) What kind or story of polyamory would you want to see represented in the media?
3) Do you see the western world shifting towards more non-monogamous practices in the future? Why or why not?
4) Are you currently involved in any activism around polyamory? If so, what is it you're aiming to accomplish?

Section 4: Wrap Up

1) How many current relationships are you in right now?
2) Are you from the area?
3) What is your level of education?
4) Is there anything else that I may missed or that you would like to share?